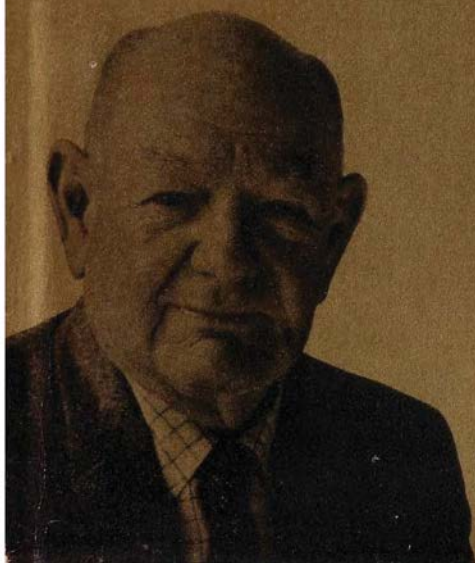


JOHN YATES-BENYON

# Lawrence Green:

*Memories of  
a Friendship*



To Llewellyn and Ina Thomas, Scott and Enid Haigh and to my wife, Joan, Lawrence Green's dear friends who helped so much to ease the suffering of his last months, and to all those readers who found enjoyment in his books and to whom his quick departure meant the loss of an old and well-loved friend and entertainer, this volume is respectfully dedicated.

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## INTRODUCTION

“How about writing your autobiography, Uncle Laurie?” I asked when the laughter had subsided. My question was prompted by a new, amusing anecdote of his earlier years told by Lawrence Green over after-dinner coffee with my wife, me and a close friend in his favourite Sea Point restaurant shortly before his last serious operation.

“Read all my books and you have read my autobiography,” he smiled goodnaturedly. “There’s a great deal of me in each, there is little left to add.”

“But all your books are mainly about places and other people,” my wife pursued my suggestion with enthusiasm. “Why not write your *whole* personal story in one volume? I am sure there are many of your ‘fans’ who would like to know much more about you the person rather than you the writer – your philosophy for living, your genuine likes and dislikes, joys and disappointments ...”

“Yes, and there are still so many humorous stories and experiences that you have not told in your books,” I interrupted eagerly. “You owe it to your public to tell these just as you have told me in the past.”

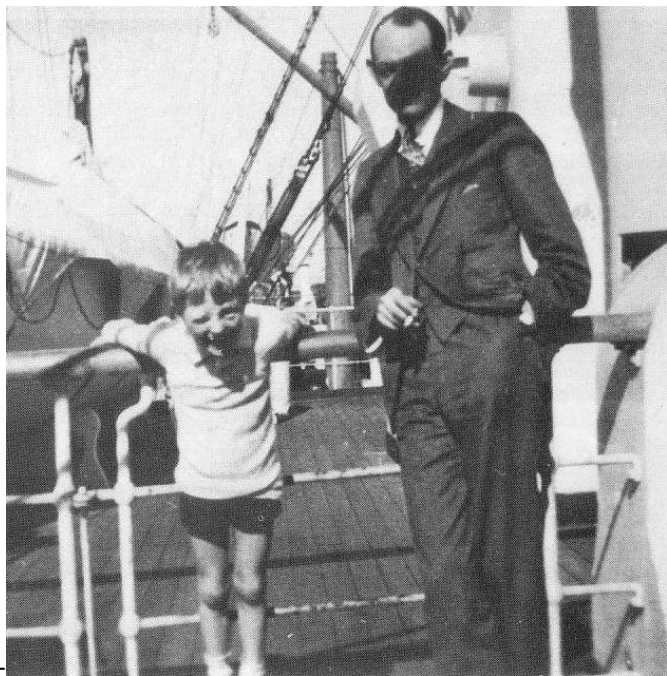
Laurie shook his head and his frown was a warning signal that the subject had begun to weary him. And when Laurie became edgy it was usually time to change the conversation. “You’ll find the potted version of my life in ‘Where Men Still Dream,’ superficial, I know, but enough to satisfy me if not all my readers. I leave that sort of thing to other authors; I’m just not interested in tackling it at my stage of life. Anyway, I can’t recall many stories I have left untold.”

“I remember dozens,” I brashly disagreed. “What about the Verneuk Pan one, or the delightful story about your army friend and Hitler’s chair? And several come to mind about your experiences in both world wars.”

“I doubt that they are worth telling,” Laurie steered the discussion neatly towards a close, “and some of them could not be told anyway in the interest of good taste. My writing life has nearly ended and I have practically written myself out now. Perhaps another book or two, not more, and my autobiography will not, I think, be one of them.”

Laurie had made up his mind for the time being, and having done so I knew that he would not be budged.

But there were those among the many of his readers who wondered and asked themselves the question: What manner of man was Lawrence Green; what was he really like? Would these be wholly content only with the fragmentary glimpses of their literary hero allowed to creep in here and there in the thousands of pages of his thirty-three best-selling books? I, who had known him intimately for over forty-five years and was, during the last two of his life, to proudly fill to a small extent the yawning gap caused by my mother’s death and become, in his own words, his best, most trusted and understanding friend and confidant, did not think so.



Laurie entered my life in 1927 when I was six years old and he was twenty-seven. He then had a little hair, and I had knobby knees.

Good biographies are, theoretically at any rate, chronological, factually accurate, impersonal and devoid of bias. But all too often they turn out exaggeratedly laudatory or unreasonably critical, clinically sterile and basically dishonest and misleading.

Being incapable of meeting the necessary high requirements for reporting as a truthful, unprejudiced and emotionally uninvolved observer and analyst the long and varied life of travel, adventure, exploration, wars, journalism and leading South African authorship which was his destiny, I have no desire to attempt to set myself up as Lawrence Green's biographer. I know my limitations in this regard, would fall far short of doing him justice, and do not have the crass conceit to try.

But what of Laurie the man, the warm-hearted, frequently obstinate – at times even old-womanish – ever generous and fiercely loyal friend and my respected father-figure? No one except my mother knew and understood Lawrence Green as well as I. Surely others not as fortunate should not be denied the enormous pleasure of knowing him too – Laurie the person, the intensely steadfast, amusing human and humane being and companion behind the impressive row of mind-rousing book titles.



In the pages that follow I have tried to share as far as I am able my lengthy and happy friendship with this genuine and lovable credit to the human race, for friendships shared are friendships

gained, and Laurie showed me that friendship is the greatest of all gifts to man upon this earth.

I owe to Laurie a final salutation, a sincere and lasting token of my depthless regard, a sad last gesture of eternal fond remembrance. These are perhaps within my ability to fulfil by writing of him, in all humility, as Lawrence Green – my friend, my inspiration – as I who knew and loved him best of all apart from my mother, knew him.

Cape town. 1973.

**John W. Yates-Benyon.**

## CHAPTER 1

### WHAT MANNER OF A MAN

*Of manners gentle, of affections mild,  
In wit, a man; simplicity, a child.*

Alexander POPE

I can see him now, striding up Blaauwberg beach towards distant Melkbosch Strand, a tall, barefooted figure in baggy, ill-fitting khaki shorts secured at the waist by an old frayed neck-tie, open-neck shirt and large floppy sun hat. This is as I shall always picture him in my mind's eye, for Lawrence George Green will forever be synonymous with the wind-swept sand dunes, long stretch of week-day-desolate beach and the wild cries of the sea birds of his beloved Blaauwberg Strand.

Of other lands and fascinating cities he knew a great deal. His inborn liking for travel, gratified only to some degree by a life-time of wandering, adventure and good living, led him inexorably to the glamorous flesh-pots of civilisation – New York, Rio, Paris, London, Monte Carlo, and many others besides – and also to some of the loneliest and most inaccessible places on earth – St Helena, Tristan da Cunha, the wilds of the Kalahari Desert, the unexplored regions of the Okavango and the northernmost parts of inhospitable latter day South West Africa.

Laurie (he could not bear his name spelt any other way) loved the world, its brashness and its solitude, the strivings, futilities and dreams of its peoples, and he wrote about these with understanding and compassion. But it was to Blaauwberg Strand, the tiny hamlet nestling on the northern shore of Table Bay, fifteen miles from his Sea Point home, to which he always returned gratefully after his frequent trips away. The “Beach of Dreams”, he called it in one of his book chapters, and Laurie was no sentimentalist who awarded such descriptive titles without significant personal meaning.

“There is no air quite like it,” he would observe, breathing in deeply before setting off on a regular four-mile walk up the deserted sands. “Fresh Blaauwberg air has a certain healthy, invigorating tang found nowhere else. It is this that has done the most to keep me alive for so long; I am certain that without the clear Blaauwberg air in my lungs I would never have enjoyed the good health with which I have been favoured.” He really believed this, and it might, of course, be true.

Once, in the early days which he liked to describe as the time when he was poor, he bought a house there, a small cottage right down on the beach, against which the waves lapped at high tide. He lived here for a year, surrounded by his books and old ships’ furniture, commuting in his Baby Austin between his seaside home and the daily Wanderer’s Column desk of his evening newspaper the “Cape

Argus”, and cared for by his Coloured cookboy, David, who, with a touch of untrained genius, prepared as if by magic his threecourse meals on an old blue-flame stove with the aplomb of a Continental *chef de cuisine*, and kept his home in order. Here at his battered desk in the glow of the hissing Primus lamp, while the Atlantic waves chuckled against the outside walls and fussing ducks mewed and squawked on nearby Bird Island in the bay, he performed his favourite nightly chore which was to lead to literary fame and fortune.

“I like writing, but in those days I really needed the money and it was often the latter, not the former, that spurred me on to those long tiring hours of work,” he often looked back on the days when he was dependent only on a small newspaper salary. “Those were hard times. Many of my sweat-wrung efforts winged straight back from editors’ desks like boomerangs, and I quite believe that at one time I could boast the finest collection of politely worded rejection slips and foreign postage stamps in South Africa. But I was determined to make the grade. I heartily disliked working for an employer and I saw a literary career as my only chance of escape from the long, long littleness of tedious subservience. I just had to keep going, despite the mounting pile of depressing printed ‘editor regrets’ returns.”

His life at Blaauwberg was simple and austere, early morning bathes in the icy sea, miles long walks when the tide was low and the sand firm and crisp underfoot, and

the prodigious night-time flow of articles and short stories from his pen for local and overseas magazine and newspaper markets, spoiled only by the hateful tyranny of the daily stint at the Wanderer's desk.

He was always pleased to see close friends who often called, but Laurie, from an early age when he began exhibiting leanings towards marked individuality, was never to lose the aura of solitariness which clung to him. Well-handled solitariness was perhaps the key to his ultimate literary success and was to become the firmly-laid cornerstone of his gifted bachelor's way and character throughout his maritally uncompanied life.

"I am used to being alone, and quite early learnt to come to terms and cope with it," he explained once in answer to my anxiety over his lack of domestic help when he lay ill in his Sea Point flat. "In a way I have really been alone all my life. If I had let this worry me I would never have had the desire or the enthusiasm to travel and do as much writing as I have. And just think what I would have lost. No, in many ways being alone has suited me – I have had few responsibilities to curb my wanderlust, and without travel I may have remained a one-book man, or perhaps a no-book man for the rest of my days, and I would perhaps still be the unwilling slave of newspaper proprietors.

"I can't remember the number of hotel bedrooms I have been alone and ill in all over the world; I tried to count them a day or so ago and gave up when I reached eleven. Others may have become dejected and packed it in, but I have a great many mental

resources, can live happily with my thoughts and am quite content to be alone. I am very fortunate, I am often alone, but never lonely.”

And yet during the last two years of his life he was to know the sour taste of real loneliness. It was then that he was heard to remark in bitter tones reflecting his regret at what might have been, that bachelors lived their lives like princes, but certainly died their deaths like dogs.

It was only the summer South-Easter, when the wind-driven sand tore down the beach, stripping cars of duco, fouling up window-panes and transforming the placid bay before his cottage into wind-lashed turmoil, that finally drove Laurie from his beloved Blaauwberg back to the shelter of a Cape Town residence.

“I only paid five hundred pounds for the cottage in those days,” he would reminisce in later years when the property market had risen tenfold and the house was worth a small fortune, “and at the time it cleaned me out of every penny of my savings. I sold the place a year later for five hundred and fifty pounds and congratulated myself on being such a shrewd businessman. It only showed what a fool I really was. But the fifty pounds profit wag a Godsend at the time, and it’s never any use having regrets about the past.”

But for forty years after, while he enjoyed good health, he drove his car to his favourite seaside hamlet two mornings a week and set off on his long walk up the coast to far-off Eerste Klip and Kreeftebaai, examining as he went the tide-

washed driftwood, breathing the good clean air and returning with tales of unusual and exciting discoveries he had made along the way. “I love Blaauwberg in all weathers – the wind and the rain and the fog – I know its every facet and appreciate them all,” he said. “I hope I’ll still be striding up the beach as regularly in old, old age. There is very little indeed that could keep me from this simple but supreme pleasure.”

But there were several interruptions. Short ones, when he was off on trips to Europe and expeditions to the wilds, and the few occasions when slight indispositions necessitated rest at home. And one long one which kept him from the exhilarating Blaauwberg air for six action-packed years. Munich and World War II, and Laurie discarded his faded shorts and beach shirt for the peaked cap and two “pips” of a South African Air Force lieutenant, and exchanged the quiet expanse of Blaauwberg beach for the hustle and bustle and noisy uproar of the vaster Middle East deserts.

But Blaauwberg was never far from his thoughts during his long penitence at General Headquarters in Pretoria and Cairo, nor during the anxious Allied military debacle and retreat back from Tobruk. He longed for the solitude of unhurried walks along the sea-kissed Blaauwberg shore and missed the good fresh air which, no matter where he searched, he could not find along the warm Mediterranean coast at

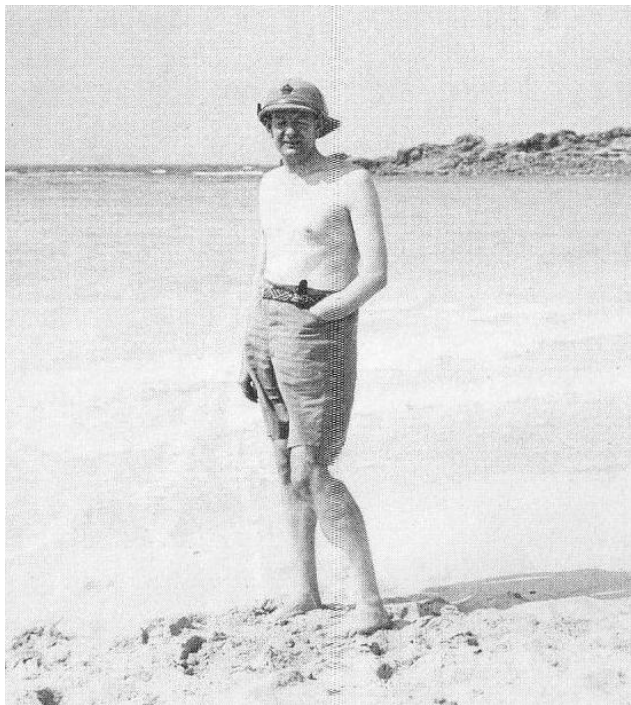
Alexandria and Tobruk, among the barren hills of Palestine or in the shimmering Cyprus heat. He remembered with nostalgia the joys of simple pleasures found so naturally on Blaauwberg beach, and from the small uncomplex mysteries which had puzzled or delighted him on his solitary rambles along the Atlantic coast.

Once a giant cobra baffled him by snaking unconcernedly across his path and nonchalantly entering the breakers to swim out aimlessly to sea. Over the years he had collected sealed bottles containing greetings messages flung from passing ships by lucky passengers and sailors bound for romantic-sounding lands, and washed up on the beach.

One which intrigued him carried the cryptic invitation, written in faded purple ink on yellowed paper: "I am 24, dark-haired and Spanish. I speak three languages. Visit me at 236 Calle Casanova, Pernambuco". The date showed that it had taken the message three years to come to rest on the Blaauwberg shingle. Years later Laurie was still wondering whether the writer was man or woman, and half-considered journeying to Brazil to solve the mystery for himself.

I remember as a child the hot and windless afternoon Laurie returned from a ramble up the beach with the huge drifting meteorological balloon he had picked up in the shallows, a great orange sphere which, when blown up to its full capacity, gave me hours of frolicking delight for many happy summer months to come. On one occasion he discovered an unexploded bomb half-covered by the drifting sand; on others he reported, to my childish glee, his dramatic encounters with massive injured





Alexandria, 1943. Nowhere on the North African coast could Laurie find the same sort of invigorating Blaauwberg air he missed so much.

sealions driven in to sanctuary among the tide-bashed rocks, and with pathetic oiled-up sea birds too weak to scamper to safety, and of the timid buck and nesting birds he had surprised among the thickly bushed and shifting dunes.

But of the many animals and birds which held his interest and which he found the time to study, it was the humble penguin that captured his imagination most. “These birds have a strange fascination for me,” he admitted shortly before his death when I remarked on the effectiveness of a penguin illustrated jacket of an ornithological volume on his table. “I have made a point of reading up as much as I can about the birds and have visited them in zoos all over the world when there is an exhibit worth seeing. They are amazing creatures with many human characteristics, anachronisms in a modern world – and they have my entire sympathy, as do seals. There is nothing more regal than an Emperor penguin, or even the humble jackass, like cats they have a dignity all their own. I have often observed these strange creatures in their natural habitats, of course, on Dassen Island and on the rocky islands off Tristan, but there is still a great deal I do not know and would like to learn about them.”

He spoke with pleasure of making a special pilgrimage to Edinburgh where, he said, the zoo housed the largest penguin collection in the world. But alas! he was never well enough to venture as far afield again.

But what manner of man was this who obtained so easily such happiness and peace of mind and culled such variety of unusual interests from life’s simply acquired and inexpensive offerings, yet was still drawn as if by a magnet to the brightest lights, the slickest cabarets, the elite hotels and most expensive gourmet restaurants of

sophistication? There is no gainsaying his simple complexity, his placid yet at the same time strange and unpredictable personality which those who did not know him well were often at a loss to understand.

There were those who considered him unfriendly and withdrawn, and did not like him for his sometimes peculiar-seeming unsocial outlook. Casual ship-board acquaintances, resenting his instinct to avoid all herd participation, frequently wrote him off as vain, unapproachable and difficult to take to. These were the losers – those incapable through weaknesses of insight due to their own outgoing personalities of penetrating the protective screen of apparent apathetic uninterest which hid an intensely shy, retiring and gentle nature.

Laurie knew his reputation as a social enigma, and it sometimes distressed him. But there was little he could do to remedy this. “I happen to be an extreme introvert,” he summed up his attitude towards casual personal relationships, “and introverts are born, and are not the result of wilful effort.

“I travel at my own convenience and for my own pleasure, not to be interrupted at drink time by some sports committee idiot grinning through a horse-collar and tugging importunately at my sleeve to come and play off a semi-final of a stupid deck quoits competition. I can usually find someone worth talking to at sea – some of the shrewdest brains I have come across travel first class by Union Castle – and I often meet most interesting folk sitting at the bar or round the swimming pool. But by and large I am happiest when left alone to do what I want in my own way.”

With this in view and, anticipating the dreaded inevitable invitation (when he became famous) to join the captain's table, he always insisted on a dining saloon table for one. His primary object on boarding an ocean liner and stowing his bags was to seek out the chief dining saloon steward, and, tipping lavishly, secure his desired privacy.

"Sharing a table with others has a great disadvantage," he defended his lone eating habits. "Sitting with people means that each one gets a regular turn to supply wine at meals. More often than not the tastes of others in this respect are not mine and I frequently find a wine I am unable to drink being poured into my glass."

Laurie's public image, obtained through his 33 published works, tends to be that of an adventurous stoic, a Hemingwaytype character most at home in old, comfortable hunting clothes, high-powered rifle in the crook of his arm, camera slung about his neck and a sleeping bag his only concession to soft living.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Laurie was, in fact, the very antithesis of what many of his readers pictured him to be. But unlike Hemingway, he could never be said to be guilty of the slightest effort to reinforce or perpetuate his inaccurate public image as a physically-tough, rip-roaring man of the wide open spaces by attempting to live up to the majority of his readers' expectations. To accuse him of this would be injustice. Even had he wished to do so the nature of his temperament would have rendered it impossible for him to succeed.

While undoubtedly in later life secretly enjoying his fame and adventurous reputation, and rarely going out of his way to dispel his admirers' romantically

erroneous notions of his physical capabilities, his basically soft nature and below average physical endowments would have prevented him from leading the type of pioneering life of the less sensitive, more robust, and devil-may-care characters who filled the pages of his many books and whom he so greatly admired.

But Laurie's grudging admiration for individualists prepared to brave the consequences of social censure for the joys of following free, self-determined existences unhindered by the manacles of community disapproval, lingered near the surface of his contradictory make-up all his life. "Recluses, vagabonds, tramps and round-the-world single-handed yachtsmen have usually discovered workable formulas for living," he often remarked. "And I am deeply interested in the psychology and thoughts of aberrants. They don't necessarily always earn my respect, but the person who can cheerfully tell the world to go to hell and take happily to the road with few material possessions is certainly worth taking note of, and I have yet to find one who hasn't an unusual story to relate and a philosophy to listen to, even though I may not agree with what they think or do."

And his "nose" for a good story always led him unerringly to those with worthwhile tales to unfold – it was, in fact, this well-developed truth-seeking aptitude which was to lead him to success in journalism and, later, helped him become his country's most consistently best-selling author of factual nonfiction books – and

accounts, in part, for his lifelong absorption with the lives and outlooks of those who non-conformed. But friends who knew him intimately could also discern in his writing formulas the strong thread of wish fulfilment.

A strict conformist in practically every aspect of his own life, Laurie was aware of his limitations. "It has always been my desire to remain as inconspicuous as possible, even as a small child," he often remarked, "and I shall continue to try to achieve this, under all and any circumstances." And this he strove for to a sometimes near absurd degree. In dress and behaviour he rarely veered from ultra-conservatism, and there was little argument that his deeply-rooted inhibitions were the frequent source of irritation to his gay and more irresponsible acquaintances who, in his company, often found his shut-in retiring nature a block to the expression of their own individuality and exuberance.

Laurie was often accused of being infuriatingly timid, rarely prepared to take normal chances in life. And this was largely true. His principles were at all times exaggeratedly high by accepted standards of human conduct; this, together with his abnormal fear of social disapproval and an inward-looking temperament, was to create a rather rigid and inflexible nature characterised by a strong degree of caution and an overwhelming drive to stay well within the norms of approved

social conduct. He found his personal formula for contented living in the stronghold of a sustained remoteness difficult to penetrate.

Laurie was, perhaps, the most honest man I have ever known. Incapable of guile when this was obviously required and it would have paid him handsomely to compromise, he was seldom prepared to sacrifice to the smallest extent a portion of his integrity for the rewards of social or material self-gain. But honesty does not always result in popularity, and Laurie's forthrightness could, and often did, wound deeply and dismay his friends and acquaintances. Rarely willing to volunteer an obviously controversial opinion in company – indeed, his instinct was to avoid all discussions of contentious nature – he could, when specifically asked to state his views, be counted upon to speak the plain, ungarnished truth, often in scathing, hard-hitting terms which were conducive to making enemies rather than friends.

It appeared at times that to remain true to himself he could consider no concessions to diplomacy for soothing ruffled spirits and the keeping of the peace even when these could have been achieved with little sacrifice or effort on his part. And the truth as seen and voiced by Laurie was all too frequently that that hurt and left a scar.

Once, having had a suit tailored at small expense, I proudly showed it to him and invited his comments on my sartorial bargain. I should have known better. "Change your tailor," was his honest advice. "The shoulders fit badly, and I could empty a bowl of porridge down your neck between your jacket and shirt collar. You've wasted your money, but I hope you've learnt by experience that in life you get only what you pay for." He had an uncanny knack of putting his finger dead on weaknesses and things that were not quite right.

Politics, for which he had strong socialistic leanings, were anathema in general conversation, as was religion and unkind gossip about those he was partial to and who were not present to defend or explain themselves. Laurie never suffered fools gladly, although in later years, through the mellowing influence of time, his acceptance of the mental limitations of others became increasingly good-natured and benevolent. But in his assessment of mental capability, Laurie Green, although no intellectual himself, was too often blinded by personal feelings which had no basis in fact. His admiration for intelligence in others was unbounded, but as he frequently confused brains with pomposity, which he despised, he was often guilty of incorrect and unfair conclusions to the detriment of those to whom he had for some reason taken an instinctive dislike. When pressured into discussions for which he had distate or disinclination he set out to be brutally frank and cutting with the deliberate intention of bringing the disliked discussion to a quick



and final close, too often with scant consideration for the sensitivities of his dismayed companions who were trying to put their views across.

His barbs went deep, and there were many who avoided crossing words with him over topics for which he was known to have strong feelings and which he would defend with biting sarcasm and stinging innuendo of which, at times, he could be master. Later, he would sometimes regret his hasty words and attempt to make amends, often too late for the forgiveness of those shattered by his ill-conceived and thoughtlessly spoken snubs.

Lawrence Green was cursed by an irrational fear of illness and all forms of medical treatment to the end of his days. Known to faint at the sight of human blood, he once suddenly left me in a London cinema for a double brandy at the foyer bar during the screening of a hospital sequence in which a patient was being prepared for an injection. "I can't bear the thought of suffering," he explained when, at the end of the show, I joined him at the bar. "Perhaps this is a selfish attitude because subconsciously I am afraid it might one day happen to me. In any case, I could not just sit there coolly watching a needle jabbed into human flesh. This sort of thing surely cannot be classified as entertainment. I began to feel queer the moment I saw the hypodermic and my stomach started to turn over. As it is, I fear that my dinner has already been ruined. I passed out once when having wax removed from

my ear, that's how sensitive I am. Now you know why I felt it necessary to leave you and have a decent drink to quieten my jangled nerves."

And yet he often said he should have been a doctor! Laurie genuinely respected the medical profession and admired the way doctors stuck together. Doctors, in fact, were the only scientifically trained people in whom he had the slightest faith, and to Laurie their word was invariably law, their advice to be followed strictly and to the letter.

"There is a camaraderie in the medical profession found only among doctors," he told me on more than one occasion. "They hang together and support each other and never let one another down no matter what. You'll never hear a doctor criticising or abusing another; their union is the strongest, most cohesive in the world. I could never have passed the examinations, but I think I would have made a good medical practitioner had I been able to, and the training would have helped me tremendously with my writing.

"Doctors are taught to observe, and observation is a vital tool to writers. Look at Somerset Maugham, Cronin, Francis Brett Young and Richard Gordon, all doctors who became successful authors because they had been taught to observe humanity and to think clearly and scientifically. Yes, I should have been a doctor – not a surgeon or a general practitioner, mind you, I would not like being interrupted at mealtimes and hauled out of bed at night – but some easy specialisation such as pathology or psychiatry, working office hours, raking in huge fees and having nothing to do with operations, blood and casualty cases."

There were those who identified a strong element of hypochondria in Laurie's make-up. Although he enjoyed excellent health until his seventieth year, he, from a comparatively early age, tended to take an exaggerated interest in his physical welfare, and could be said to have cosseted himself to a somewhat ridiculous and unnecessary degree. Minor indispositions such as mild head colds, shrugged off by most, drove him at once to bed and often resulted in the cancellation of important appointments and arrangements which, his friends maintained, he could quite easily have fulfilled with a little less introspective gloom and small actual discomfort to himself.

But there was some justification for his preoccupation with his health and physical well-being. Laurie suffered acute indigestion which caused him periodic distress from early youth, and throughout his life he was forced, much to his chagrin, to be particularly careful of what and how he ate. Haunted by the fear of severe attacks of stomach trouble, he could never be anything but a fearfully fussy eater, a situation which resulted directly in the development of his fetish for *haute cuisine* and his life-long search for first-class restaurants and food and drink to suit his delicate palate and whimsical digestion, for which he became known as a leading culinary expert and gourmet.

Tinned bully-beef, meat and sausage roasted roughly over camp fires could, if not extremely carefully handled beforehand, bring on swift attacks of stomach cramps guaranteed to knock him in a groaning heap of pain-wracked misery before the meal was through. Such digestive weakness does not qualify a man entirely for a hard and robust pioneering life in the wide outdoors, and on most of his expeditions to the wilds beyond the boundaries of civilisation in search of literary material, he was never completely happy or at ease unless he knew of a nearby village hotel offering hot, sit-down meals at a dining-room table which he could get to easily.

He had a deep dislike of out-door living in all its aspects, and admitted that he put up with many of its discomforts only as a practical means of research for the accumulation of first hand experiences for the sort of books he felt best equipped to write.

He also loathed all forms of social *al fresco* entertainment, especially when this entailed eating and drinking. Often, when invited out to braai-veises or lunches in the open air, he found some flimsy excuse for not attending, preferring to dine alone in his flat or a restaurant on the dishes of his own choosing and in an atmosphere more in tune with his temperamental food desires. Picnics were taboo, and on long motor trips he was often known to deviate miles off route to

find a cafe and light meal served under cover rather than rough it with sandwiches and a thermos flask somewhere along the roadside. Travelling companions, less stomach conscious and more anxious to push ahead, found this a highly disconcerting, time-wasting trait and often expressed their thoughts in no uncertain manner. But Laurie, always adamant about, as he termed it, “the desirability of punctual meals taken in a calm ambiance conducive to good digestion,” made few adjustments to his eating peculiarities. when it came to gastronomic disagreements or suggested changed or postponed meal times.

Laurie loved to tell the following story. During World War II he and his old friend, Ken Andrew, were driving a jeep over the Western Desert and became mixed up in an Allied retreat. Fearing capture by the rapidly advancing Germans, they joined the long convoy of troop-packed trucks and lorries heading back to Cairo and safety. The convoy led them through a small desert village base from which British and South African troops were pulling out in hurried disorder.

In the dusty roadway a harassed military policeman was trying to sort out the snarls of heavy army traffic grinding its way towards the rear. Hot, tired and hungry, Lieutenant Andrew stopped the jeep opposite the red-cap and beckoned him over. “Corporal,” he said, with a deadly serious expression, “kindly direct us to the nearest restaurant.” “By this magnificent gesture,” Laurie said laughingly

afterwards, “Ken proved himself to be a man very much after my own heart. He not only expects high standards of cuisine under any crisis situation, but showed his commendable appreciation of food in not allowing the apprehension of possibly being taken prisoner to deviate him from his sincere desire for a good square meal in pleasing surroundings.”

Later, he and Ken came across a small three-tent British army outpost out in the desert dunes miles from the nearest habitation. “The personnel consisted of two captains, a lieutenant and a sergeant,” Laurie explained the curious military setup, “and to this day I have never been able to find out what they were supposed to be doing out there in the blue. To make it even stranger they were all pansies – the lieutenant had his initials monogrammed on his army shirt pocket, and the sergeant was sent out every morning to pick desert flowers – and they kept open house for all callers and went out of their way to make every casual visitor welcome. Both captains were devoted cooks, and this unlikely menage provided regular first-class meals on a par with the best I have ever eaten.

“Vintage wine flowed – don’t ask me where it was obtained, I am as mystified as you – and dining at the long, candle-lit table with its shining cutlery, finger-bowls and artistic flower arrangements was more like sitting down to a magnificent repast in a baronial hall or five-star hotel dining-room than in a forward post near

the battle line. This, I consider, is the civilised manner in which wars should be fought.”

Although never a good or ambitious cook himself, Laurie through his deep interest and wide and concentrated study, was to be accepted later as an acknowledged authority on the world's cooking and cuisine. Incapable of mastering foreign languages, even Afrikaans which he tried to do and failed miserably, he prided himself on his aptitude to read and understand at a glance any menu presented in a strange tongue in any country in the world. “Put me down in Istanbul, Stockholm, Bucharest, Vienna or any other place you care to name, and I might not be able to make out the street signs or follow the newspapers, but I guarantee I would be able to read the hotel and restaurant menus and know exactly what they are about.” And, having frequently put him to the test, I can vouch for the fact that he could!

His large general library contained at the time of his death over 200 volumes covering all aspects of the world's cookery, among them rare and valuable Africana items, the accumulation of many years' selective collecting. He seemed to know the contents of each one, had memorised in detail a great number of their complicated recipes, and could head straight for a specific volume and turn

immediately to the page he wanted when consulted on some or other esoteric cooking question.

Laurie could not pass over a magazine or newspaper advertisement offering pamphlets on food preparation or special recipes of which he had not heard without cutting out the coupon there and then and mailing it, together with his remittance, to the advertiser. His hoard of plain and illustrated books and menus from the best known hotels and restaurants in all parts of the globe soon reached such unhandy proportions that he was faced with a serious storage problem in his small onebedroomed flat; at one stage, hampered by the encroaching tide of reference works, he seriously considered taking another small apartment as a store for his huge miscellany of books and pamphlets. Shrewdly obtaining many of his cookery and other books for only a few pence or shillings each during the early days before collectors had predicted their future scarcity and great potential worth, Laurie had, over the years, seen their value increase to many pounds a copy, and could boast one of the most comprehensive and valuable cookery and Africana compilations in Southern Africa.

A specialist in the methods of genuine old Cape cookery, he had unbounded faith in the authenticity of "Hilda's Where Is It" as perhaps the most accurate and reliable work on traditional Cape cooking art. He maintained that many cookery



books were phoney, not worth consideration or buying, as their authors, generally ignorant of cooking expertise, too often borrowed recipes from other cookery manuals, changing the ingredient proportions slightly to suit their cunning purposes, indiscriminately adding one or two of their own here and there and hoodwinked by blatant fabrication through the presentation of old, well-worn ideas in disguised and unsound garb.

“Writing a worthless cookery book is easy,” Laurie advised all aspirant cookery book authors who approached him for advice and guidance. “A worth-while, acceptable cook book is, perhaps, the hardest book of all to write. Those who can, make a valuable contribution to civilised living. But there are not many of these around, unfortunately. The ground has by now been pretty well covered, and there are few unknown cooking methods and new recipes which have not been tried and recorded. Most modern cookery books are invariably disappointing, merely trumped-up forms of old and hackneyed cooking principles dressed up in newer clothes, and are simply not worth the space in kitchens.”

To emphasize the validity of his views he would quote the instance of a well-established publisher friend who accepted, at face value, a bulky manuscript on cooking recipes from an unknown writer without first checking its or her *bona fides*. The illustrated volume, having been published at great expense, had to be

withdrawn from circulation only two months after publication when furious readers complained that the dishes produced from most of the appetising recipes were utterly uneatable. “This publisher received no sympathy from me,” Laurie chortled in delight at the fiasco, “he deserved what he got for his carelessness, and he never published another cookery book again, thank God.”

Asked to name the best cookery book in his mammoth collection, Laurie had no hesitation in taking down the thick, well-studied copy of Escoffier’s “A Guide to Modern Cooking” from his crowded bookshelf “Escoffier really knew his stuff, and there has been no chef like him since, nor probably ever will be again. His is a genuine cook book – not one of those new and useless arty-tarty manuals so much in evidence these days – the Bible of all real cooks, the precious fruit of profound culinary knowledge and a sincere dedication to the magnificent art of cooking. The great Escoffier was the Nijinski of the kitchen; follow his counsel and you will never go wrong, every dish will be fit for a king.”

Mrs. Beeton’s famous cookery guide contained, according to Laurie, sound basic rules for plain, unambitious cooking but lacked a certain necessary flair which rendered it an interesting but somewhat archaic exemplar for modern, everyday cooking demands. It was, he thought, a cookery book which made an acceptable

wedding gift which no newly-married girl should be without until she graduated up the scale of cooking proficiency.

Among his books were those dealing exclusively with hotels and restaurants in various parts of the world. These he read avidly, scoring the margins with cryptic shorthand annotations whenever he was planning a trip abroad. There were few he had not heard of, a good many he had experienced personally during his many travels, and without difficulty he was often able to recall the particular specialities of the house and exactly how they had been served through sheer feats of memory long after he had sampled them himself or had read them up.

“My hobby is good food and drink,” he told those impressed by the long rows of bookshelves filled with unusual and obscure volumes dealing with his culinary interest, “and it is necessary that I keep abreast of all new restaurants opening here and overseas to stimulate my interest and make my trips abroad really enjoyable. I like to seek out highly recommended restaurants and check the standards indicated by the food guide-books for my own satisfaction. And I frequently find these badly wanting, I am afraid.”

Laurie considered the Michelin Guide the most reliable of these references, and carefully listed in his travel diary the names and addresses of the dining places which had been awarded or had lost merit stars in the parts of France he intended

visiting. His favourite pastime when patronising a restaurant for the first time was to give or subtract marks for general ambience, service, table appointments and the quality of the food and wine. And he was not an easily satisfied or placated judge.

Cape Town restaurants, he firmly believed to his dying day, were among the worst he had ever encountered – “Chips with everything, inferior service, tinned peas and steaks as tough as the soles of old boots” – and he was seldom to discover a local restaurant meeting the high standards he felt to be the minimum for satisfactory dining. Only on a few occasions overseas did his privately awarded marks vary from the merit ratings granted by the Michelin Guide inspectors, but he often differed widely with the remarks and recommendations of less authoritative publications purporting to know the relative worths of public eating establishments.

I recall the time in a Nice restaurant when Laurie, overjoyed at for once catching out the reliability of the highly esteemed Michelin Guide, concluded that as he was obviously so well-qualified he did not see why he should not apply for a position as a Guide inspector, a job, which he hastened to assure me, he considered must be among the most pleasant and satisfying in the world. On this occasion he was entertaining me to dinner at a leading Promenade Des Anglais

restaurant famous for its *filet mignon*, snails in garlic sauce, crepe suzette and large wine cellar. “The Michelen people give this place four stars,” Laurie said at the conclusion of the, to my mind, sumptuous repast, “but I am only prepared to allow three. Firstly, the wine was served exactly two minutes after we had started our main course; secondly, I had to ask for English mustard instead of French. Both these lapses indicate thoughtlessness on the part of the management, and sub-standard service on the part of the waiters. It is inexcusable in a restaurant of this supposed class and cannot be overlooked. To me four stars denote near perfection and this place, although having a world reputation, is at least one star under. No, three is all it is worth, and I shall write to Michelin’s suggesting that they re-check their information for the next edition.” He did, and in the next volume of the Guide the restaurant was down to three stars!

But his own self-prepared meals were themselves nothing much to write home about. Although theoretically *au fait* with the most complicated and weird recipes and cooking methods, he was utterly incapable of putting his considerable knowledge into practice. Never able to turn out anything but the plainest meals himself, he nevertheless tackled each cooking experiment with the greatest thought and care, but always with the same disappointing result.

“I just do not have the required touch,” he realised his kitchen deficiencies. “Cooking is a great and intricate art, and I am merely a knowledgeable critic not, unfortunately, an artistic creator. And, as everyone knows, those who can’t perform an art themselves are inclined to try and teach or criticise it.”

There were few, including himself, he maintained who knew how to poach a palatable egg and he seldom lost the opportunity of consulting chefs on the ships on which he was travelling or at the hotels at which he happened to be staying, as to their methods of creating this elementary, but to him, all too rarely properly prepared dish. And in his view few chefs presiding over first-class kitchens had mastered the subtle intricacies of poaching eggs to perfection. After years of investigation he came to the conclusion that the secret lay merely in forming a miniature whirl-pool with a silver dessertspoon in the centre of the pot’s boiling water, then dropping the contents of the egg carefully into the vortex so that it spun around at an exact number of revolutions a minute.

“A proficient egg poacher must have the dexterity and timing of an experienced croupier,” he pronounced, “too few or too many revolutions round the water funnel and the egg is spoiled. Poaching an egg is a severe test for a truly great chef and most can never pass the examination.” But try as he did to prove this theory, he was not successful in ever poaching an egg completely to his liking.

There were few in South Africa who knew as much about wine as Lawrence Green. This he had studied diligently for years with the same passion with which he had come to know good food and cooking, with an intelligent and absorbing dedication which was to place him in the forefront of the world's connoisseurs. His monthly wine account was always enormously high – he considered the large amount of money spent on wine and travel as the two most necessary and compensating items of his expenditure – and could truthfully say that there was not a single wine in the world that he had not at some time or another bought and sampled.

Deploring the growing trend of co-operative wine producers at the expense of good South African estate wines with old, meaningful names, Laurie regretted that in a long life of serious wine study he did not have the foresight or the accommodation for the laying down of a large private wine cellar when he had the opportunity. In the years I knew him his smallish stock of choice, carefully selected wines, representative of the world's vineyards, were housed on their sides in no more auspicious hide-aways than the drawers and cupboards of the small, easily maintained houses and flats which were his Cape Town homes.

I would like to be able to say that during our close association in which time I had ample chance and encouragement to learn the pleasures of wine-drinking and the

intricacies of wine-making from such a notable tutor, some at least of his knowledge of the subject had rubbed off on me. This was not so. I do not particularly like wine, have never had the energy, even under Laurie's direction and prompting, to learn much about it and can quite easily take it or leave it alone. Preferring spirits when dining, and with a jaundiced taste for good Scotch whisky diluted in ginger ale, I am certainly not of the stuff of which wine connoisseurs like Laurie are made.

I find it beyond my capacity to discriminate one vintage or type of wine from another and, quite frankly, I have never been able to tell my Piedmont Asti from my Tuscany Elba. I am, thus, only in a position to record Laurie's views on the relative merits and demerits of the wines of the world from the odd snatches of his erudition I can recall and not through any stupendous knowledge of my own.

He was adamant that the red wines of the wine-producing countries were generally superior to the white wines and was gratified that academic wine pundits completely supported him in this. He could seldom be prevailed upon to drink even the best of white wines except perhaps for half a glass with his fish course – "The red wines of the world are the best; I will only drink a white wine on certain occasions if I have to and then it should be Chablis" – but he was certainly no wine snob and refused to be dictated to by frivolous fashion tradition



or popular ill-formed opinion. “Drink the type of wine that suits you, the wine you enjoy drinking, and don’t worry too much about suiting the colour of the wine to fish, poultry or meat,” was his sensible advice to those who came to him for pointers. He granted, however, that some dishes require a delicate wine to set off their subtle flavour and that good food could be ruined when taken with an inappropriate or too full-bodied wine.

Laurie thought some of the cheaper Cape wines among the best in the world, on a par with French and excellent value for money. He regretted that the price of South African wines had been so highly inflated by middlemen bottlestores and licensed hotel proprietors, and considered most of the more expensive local wines not worth a quarter the price. He dismissed the sparkling varieties as “carbon dioxide impregnated hangovers” – once when asked to compile for a high fee a booklet on the white wines of the Cape for a wine promoting organisation, he refused the assignment saying, “My heart just wouldn’t be in it, so I would probably do a lousy job. Now, if they wanted me to do a pamphlet on red wines, well...” – and saw little merit in local so-called rosés.

In South Africa he preferred dining in non-licensed restaurants to which he could bring his own wine, and he would groan in deep dismay when hearing that a restaurant he was partial to was aiming for a liquor licence. “Licensed places,” he

complained, “charge double the bottle store prices and frequently cannot supply the wine I particularly desire at the time. When I bring my own wine I know that I am getting exactly what I want. Wine-drinking should be encouraged in South Africa, but there are too many people taking rake-offs and boosting up the price. Ordinary folk are being denied the enjoyment of our fine local wines which they cannot afford and are ruining their stomachs with cheaper spirits and inferior drinks. The true wine lovers in South Africa are the Cape Coloureds; they know their wines and drink them with the appreciation they so richly deserve.”

During the last twenty years of his life he formed the habit of drinking half a bottle of dry red table wine himself with dinner every night. When the inevitable attacks of gout began to swell and redden his toes, friends nodded their heads knowingly and seriously advised him to cut down on his large daily intake of wine, pointing out that it was probably a build-up of acidity which caused his frequent painful foot condition. Laurie brushed aside all these suggestions. “Drinking never hurt anyone,” he countered peevishly, “provided one sticks to good drinks and has nothing to do with the bad, and I only drink the very best wines, always have done. No, drinking is good for one – it is smoking that does the damage, not good liquor. I am in favour of drinking and heartily recommend it to all, but not smoking. I would like to see the sale of cigarettes, pipes and cigars banned as severe threats to health and happiness.”

Indeed, he had become a formidable crusader against tobacco in his fifty-third year when, one day racked by a frenzied coughing fit brought on by one of his thirty-five-a-day cigarettes, he resolutely tossed the near-full packet into the wastepaper basket and vowed never to light up again. He not only kept this promise but from then on seldom lost the opportunity of lecturing friends on the dangers of smoking whenever they were thoughtless enough to do so in his presence. "How will you feel," he would ask smokers innocently as he watched them puffing away, "when one day they study your X-ray picture and point out the shading indicating cancer of the lung? The amount you smoke it is bound to happen sooner or later and it will then be too late to wish to God that you had never lit that cigarette. We do not die, we only kill ourselves."

In many instances his gloomy propaganda gained him converts. When this occurred he proudly reeled off the names of all those who had seen the light and had saved themselves from avoidable suffering and an early death through his constant harping on the evils of smoking and the medically denounced lethal quality of tobacco.

Difficult at times, definitely; intensely lovable, without a doubt; a man of sky-high principles and an unshakeable code of personal honour, compassion and human decency, most certainly. There were few who grew to know and love this

wonderful and charming character as well as I. Over most of the forty-five years of our deep relationship he was my sympathetic confidant, my sincere adviser, my respected father figure and my true and trusted friend. Yes, above all, he was my true and trusted friend.

I consider myself extremely favoured for few such friendships prove so mentally stimulating and emotionally enriching. To the fond memory of the great personality and humanitarian who was Lawrence George Green I owe an incalculable debt far beyond my capacity to repay.

## CHAPTER 2

### INTO MY LIFE

*Thou art the framer of my nobler being,  
Nor does there live one virtue of my soul,  
One honourable hope, but calls thee father.*

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Looking back over the years I am unable to pinpoint the exact moment in time or the circumstances in which Lawrence Green entered my life. I am, in fact, incapable of remembering, except for the infrequent fleeting liftings of the curtain from the hazy blur of time, any significant stage when he was not a vital factor in the shaping of my destiny.

Having notched up no memorable symbol of entry into my early childhood memories, he simply seems, in retrospect, to always have been around; like Topsy in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, Lawrence Green “just grewed” within the deep hollows of my mind. Although no blood relation, I seem never to have known him by any other name than “Uncle Laurie” – a respectful form of address I used until his death when I had passed into my fifties and was a husband and a father.

My own father, a charming, good-looking but rather feckless drifter, left my mother soon after my sixth birthday, taking himself off to England shortly after the divorce, there to plunge again into matrimony and raise another family. As I had not yet become fully conditioned to another male about the house, his departure caused no

trauma or unhappiness in my childish mind; if anything, my father's absence served only to strengthen the existing strong emotional bond between my doting mother and myself and I was soon to take the fullest advantage of her pampering. Quick to accept her spoiling as my expected and just due, I steadily came to see her as my personal possession to do with how and whatever I liked and to consider myself the one and only mainspring of her life, a view with which she willingly seemed to agree and go along with as compensation for her admitted guilt of having contributed in some way to losing me a father.

I was not to meet my father again for thirty years and by this time, although my mother had taken pains to preserve his image and keep my thoughts of him fresh and unblemished, my memories of my paternal parent were decidedly dim and out of focus. Since my father appeared to abandon all interest in his son and was never known to volunteer maintenance payments or financial assistance, the task of rearing and educating me, her only child, fell squarely upon my mother, a woman of substance and a member of an old, well-known Cape Town family who, despite my father's long list of irresponsible shortcomings, was to remain in love with him until the day she died.

It was sometime at this stage that Lawrence Green met and began to foster his friendship with my mother and became a frequent caller at our home. Although my natural reticence prevented me then or later from prying too deeply into my mother's personal affairs, I obtained the impression on reaching my early teens

that he became friendly with both my parents at the time he was sharing accommodation with two bachelor newspaper colleagues in a block of flats at Sea Point in which my parents and I were also staying while negotiating a house of our own, and that he actually had a liking for my father and thought him amusing. I once had my suspicions but am now convinced that Laurie was in no way responsible for the break-up of my parents' marriage, although there were those, I know, who at the time pointed the finger of accusation in his direction.

No, he was far too honest a man, a person of too high principles and finer feelings to be party to such under-handedness. Such a deliberate act would have been completely foreign to his character. Many years later when apart from being devoted mother and son we were also great and outspoken friends, I asked my mother this direct question to satisfy my nagging doubts. She assured me that this had never been the case, that she and my father had not been getting on too well and had more or less agreed to a parting of the ways some time before my mother set eyes on Laurie or he clapped eyes on her. And my mother, almost as honest and forthright as Laurie, never once told me a deliberate lie during our long, affectionate and fully trusting relationship, even when an untruth on her part might have saved her embarrassment and me distress or worry.

As Laurie and my mother were so inextricably bound together for the greater part of their lives, it is impossible to consider his trials, joys and tribulations without direct reference to my mother and vice versa. In many respects an attraction of opposites, Laurie's life was my mother's, my mother's life was Laurie's; it was as simple as that. The one complemented, stimulated and encouraged the other; to unravel the emotional weave which held them so close for such a period of time would have been as difficult as unscrambling an egg once the cook had whisked its parts to mixture. They kept each other going and when my mother died two years before Laurie he lost the will to carry on much longer himself. There was nothing my mother was not prepared to do for Laurie, nothing that Laurie would not have sacrificed for my mother, and this they proved on uncountable occasions. In writing about Laurie it becomes necessary to write about my mother. Both are dead and, I am firmly convinced, are as fondly united in death as they once were in life. There is now nothing that can hurt, nothing which I may say about them in the cause of accuracy and truth that can tarnish the wonderful memory of their lives together.

Cynics say that there is no such relationship as the platonic and yet, having known both so well, I find it hard to believe – and not on account of convenient wishful thinking – that the deep, devoted friendship between Laurie and my mother was not basically of this nature. But I could not really have cared less had



this been otherwise. Laurie liked good-looking women all his life, was attracted by their company and I know of at least four brief affairs in which he engaged after having formed his lasting attachment for my mother. I doubt that there were more as Laurie, a fundamentally shy, retiring and reticent person with a curious dread of harming others or of compromising himself, was terrified of becoming involved in amorous embroilments from which he might have trouble extricating himself later.

The four affairs of which I was aware were all transient, sensual and completely devoid of enduring emotion or tender memory. As far as these went it was clear that Laurie was not so much the instigator as the too easily-head-turned target of subtle flattery from younger women not averse to a temporary romantic fling with a prominent and monied literary name, and it was never his intention to jeopardise in any way his solid and understanding relationship with my mother by seeking and indulging in tenuous, basically unsatisfactory amours of this kind. Indeed, his apprehension at waging and losing my mother's friendship, love and high esteem, though this was never really likely, was always on his mind and he admitted later that because of guilty feelings during his misdemeanours, his few spasmodic adventures; had been singularly bereft of any spiritual uplift or lasting physical enjoyment. He was always disgusted with himself after such masculine

episodes and suffered savage pangs of conscience at the magnitude of his deceitful infidelity.

My mother was, of course, unaware of these isolated and infrequent lapses. But never for long. Laurie, smitten by torments of shame and miserably contrite always came clean and confessed them himself a day or two after they occurred. This was the sort of honourable man he was. While unburdening himself of his guilt he would sit huddled in a deep armchair, head in hands with tears streaming down his cheeks, pleading forgiveness and cursing himself for his betrayal of trust and his ungoverned weakness of the flesh. During these scenes of abject contrition my mother was, as was to be expected, deeply upset and inclined at any moment to burst into tears of jealous fury herself. Yet, certain of Laurie's unwavering devotion, she never denied him her shoulder to cry on and always overlooked his indiscretion, but not before she had extracted the maximum drama from the situation with berating histrionics which would have done credit to an old time silent film tragedienne. Being a man myself and never appreciating my mother's high moral expectations of others, I often found myself at these times with a sneaking admiration and sympathy for Laurie. Although it was quite easy to see my mother's point of view I all too often disloyally identified myself with his fall from grace during these emotionally distressing occasions, and considered him a trifle henpecked and hard done by.

Laurie was twenty-seven years old when he met my mother Luise (she was four years older), a thin six-footer with deep blue eyes, strong cleft chin, a face which, with the passing and fullness of time, was to remind one of Winston Churchill's, and a near-bald head fringed around the ears by brownish colour hair. He began to lose his hair in his late teens – a loss he attributed to the too liberal application of bay-rum and the wearing of hats and schoolboy caps which restricted the blood circulation – and by the time he entered the late twenties he was almost completely bald. This, he told me in later life, caused him not the slightest inconvenience or embarrassment although he admitted that he had from time to time played about with certain preparatory hair restorers claiming miraculous, but, as he proved, negligible, results, for the fun of seeing whether his bare scalp would suddenly sprout a luxuriant crop. "Hair can be a liability," he would pontificate when twitted about his hairless pate. "It often looks untidy, especially in the wind. Bald men appear neat and well-groomed in all weathers. If I had hair I would crop it close and brush it straight back out of the way. I've been told that with my type of face I look better bald than I would with hair. I can't vouch for this but I would like to believe it for the sake of vanity."

A feature of his appearance in these, the years before he began putting on weight and his face had filled out to true Churchillian proportions and he had grown better-looking and distinguished, were his large ears. These, together with his

bald head, impish grin and youthful countenance, earned him the appropriately affectionate nickname of “Pixie” among his friends and acquaintances. Indeed, so widely was he known by this at the Royal Cape Yacht Club, of which he was an active member since its earliest days, that there were many who sailed with him for years who were ignorant of his real Christian name!

Unfortunately it was not generally realised, even among his closest friends, that Laurie utterly detested his unflattering nickname and boiled inwardly whenever it was applied to him in his hearing. In later years when it had practically been forgotten and he thought that he had lived it down, the inadvertent use of the word “Pixie” by a well-meaning old yachting companion would evoke a fierce screwing up of the Churchill features and a brusque rebuff which left no doubt as to his extreme irritation.

Laurie was born in Kimberley in 1900 during the famous siege. His father, G. A. L. Green, a Kimberley newspaper editor, later to become a Member of the first Union Parliament and the Editor in Chief of the “Cape Argus” newspaper group, a close friend of Cecil Rhodes, General Smuts and Sir Abe Bailey, was a quiet, scholarly man with an interest in education and a special liking for Latin study which Laurie was always at a loss to understand.

His mother – a handsome lady with decided views and the Grand Dame air of the old aristocratic English school – was the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, for whom Laurie had a special affection mixed with a degree of respectful awe. Laurie, his parents and two sisters, Rita and Rosemary, moved to Cape Town shortly after Union and Laurie, except for a brief, unhappy period as a boarder in Grahamstown, received his education at the South African College School from which he matriculated at the age of seventeen with a third-class pass.

“My father was put out at this,” he recalled. “Being a keen student himself he expected me to pass in the first class. But, what the hell. I was lucky to get through at all and was only too grateful when my schooling was over.”

During his schooldays he haunted the Cape Town docks and the old pier on his bicycle, watching the shipping, talking to tugmen and freighter seamen and hiring dinghies for short rows on the bay. He set his heart on a sea career. “I wanted more than anything to go to sea as an apprentice officer and work my way up the scale,” he afterwards bemoaned his lost chances. “Life at sea would have suited me well and I know that I would have been completely happy and contented as a ship’s officer. But although my father was in favour my mother objected. She thought I could do better in life than becoming a sailor and her wish prevailed. I have always been sorry. I drifted into newspaper work simply to please my

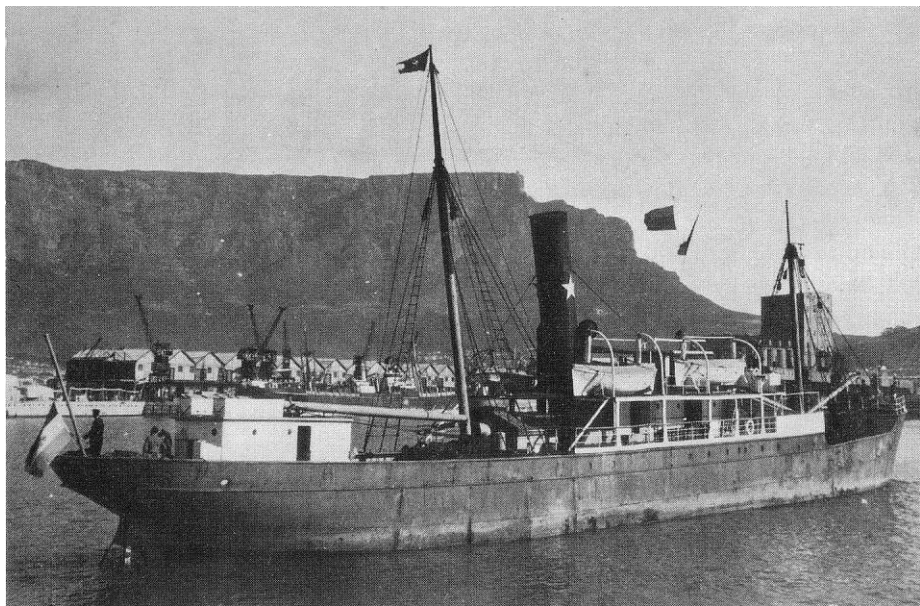
parents and because I did not know what else to do. But I was never really interested in journalism and, consequently, was dissatisfied and unhappy during most of my time on newspapers. Because of this I never got on as well as I should have in the newspaper world.

“When I left school, my father offered to send me to any university I liked, Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, Harvard, even the Sorbonne, but I was young and could not bear the thought of further study. I wanted to go to sea and when this was denied me I took the first job that came along. This was with the ‘Cape Argus’ of which my father was editor.”

In later life he appreciated the value of academic training and advised all young school leavers to obtain some form of worth-while qualification before setting out to find an occupation. “Most of my friends merely drifted into jobs without being sure what they were really doing and without proper training, much the same as I did,” he recalled. “And nearly all of them had a struggle for most of their lives at the beck and call of employers, getting nowhere and in and out of work with frequent long periods of unemployment. It was dreadful to see. There was no vocational guidance in my day and many lives were wasted through haphazard preparation for the important business of earning a living.”

But Laurie did manage to go to sea briefly. When he was sixteen his mother surrendered to his importuning and allowed him to make a short holiday trip as a deck boy on the small coaster *Ingerid* plying between Cape Town, Saldanha Bay and Durban. The life was hard and during the six weeks' voyage Laurie was to learn the meaning of long hours of backbreaking physical work. But to his mother's dismay the rough life at sea did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm for a sea-going career. In fact it seemed to suit him admirably. He loved the life, enjoyed the company of the tough old seamen and thrived on the late night watches and arduous duty. His short stint in the fo'c'sle of the coal-grimed, unglamorous *Ingerid* merely strengthened his resolve to follow a sea-going life. But this was not to be.

World War I put all thoughts of a career in the merchant navy out of Laurie's mind for some time to come. In 1917 he sailed for England on a blacked-out troop ship to join the Royal Flying Corps as a cadet pilot. "It was a hell of a trip," he remembered, "the ship was packed with all manner of improbable people on their way to join the British forces, the food was atrocious and half-way over the ship's store ran out of cigarettes. I smoked like a trooper in those days and really suffered. The only people who had them was the Coloured Cape Corps contingent and we were forced to pay exorbitant prices for cheap packets of Woodbines if we wanted a smoke. This was my first experience of the black market I was soon to get to know so well overseas!" Although my mother was against me



At the age of sixteen Laurie did a trip in the coaster Ingerid as deck boy.



going to sea she and my father raised no objection when I wanted to join the Royal Flying Corps and go to war. They were both English and patriotic and agreed that it was my duty to do my bit. My problem of choosing a career was conveniently shelved until I returned home after the war.”

Laurie and his colleagues arrived in England in mid-winter during a bitterly cold spell. He was never to forget his first sight of the huge, sprawling complex of bleak wooden bungalows, the icy, wind-swept parade ground and the strong smell of cooking cabbage of the Royal Flying Corps Training Centre on inhospitable Salisbury Plain.

In later life, whenever he made one of his regular trips to England, he always hired a taxi to take him back to the scene of his First World War misery. “It was a sort of masochistic pilgrimage,” he admitted. “Since I had trained there as a youth the place had not changed at all. It remained just as I remembered it. The long rows of draughty huts, including the very one I had occupied, and the dreaded parade ground were the same. I could even detect the smell of boiled watery cabbage in the air. After renewing acquaintanceship with the scene of my youthful stringent service life I was always happy to get back to my room and bath at my first-class West End Hotel and drown my depressing memories in a strong brandy and soda.”



Word War I. Air cadet Lawrence Green (standing second from the right) at the Royal Flying Corps Training School.

Laurie considered T. E. Lawrence's "The Mint" one of the finest pieces of evocative writing. Lawrence had also undergone air force training at the Salisbury Plain training centre and his book described the harsh conditions under which trainee airmen were taught the rudiments of service life in all their dreadful aspects. "Having shared Lawrence's experiences at that ghastly camp I can appreciate his competence as a canny observer and a realistically descriptive writer," Laurie was unstinting in his praise. "Each time I read 'The Mint' I am transported back to Salisbury Plain, its discomforts, uneatable food and the interminable drilling at which I was so hopeless. The whole scene becomes horribly vivid and I relive to the full those bleak days when I was always cold and hungry and out of favour with the regular army sergeant instructors."

Malcolm Campbell, later to become Sir Malcolm Campbell of car racing fame, was an air force examiner at the Denham School of Aeronautics at the time. Laurie appeared before him for his final oral examination on aeroplane engines – and failed. Campbell, said Laurie, was a stern, forbidding and humourless man whose abrupt and arrogant manner struck terror into the young aspiring pilots. He questioned Laurie at length about the construction and operation of modern aero engines and ended the examination by declaring petulantly that Air Cadet Green knew nothing whatsoever about them.

Eleven years later, in 1929, when Laurie was covering for his newspaper, the "Cape Argus", Campbell's attempt on the land speed record in his famous *Bluebird* on lonely Verneuk Pan in remote Bushmanland, he sent off a daily despatch which

contained several errors of a technical nature. Campbell was furious at such careless reporting and sent for him. "You obviously don't remember me, Sir Malcolm," Laurie replied blandly to the tongue-lashing he received. "In 1917 you failed me on my poor knowledge of combustion engines. Now, eleven years after, you see that I have still not learnt a damn thing more about them." Unsmiling Campbell dismissed Laurie with a disgusted wave of the hand.

The Verneuk Pan fizzle always amused Laurie. "The organisers fell flat on their faces over the costly venture," he recalled. "The test strip had been laid out incorrectly so that Campbell had to do his early morning runs directly into the rising sun. Campbell was also bad-tempered because the small flints on the track were ruining his tyres and he was extremely difficult with the Press. Instead of the thousands who were expected to flock to the Pan to watch his attempts only a handful turned up. One opportunist had decided to cash in by erecting lavatories around the Pan perimeter and charge 3d a time for their use. Can you credit it, hundreds of miles of howling wilderness and this fool went to the expense of putting up dozens of latrines! He reported, not surprisingly, that he did not take a single 3d during the whole period and was practically bankrupted. Campbell failed to break the land speed record but my young newspaper assistant, Carel Birkby, achieved some success with a motorcar. I taught him to drive on the Pan while Campbell was sulking in his tent and waiting for the right conditions."

Laurie saved his meagre air force pay to escape from the hardships of Salisbury Plain and Denham Air School for the delights of the city whenever he could

wangle an infrequent leave pass. Once, when heading for London by train, he fell in with a dark-haired young man in merchant officer's uniform who was entertaining the carriage occupants with cunning sleight of hand tricks. Laurie's interest in magic drew him naturally to the clever conjuror who immediately took to Laurie and invited him to whoop it up with him in London's bright West End. Money seemed no object to the smooth ship's officer who paid for everything from a thick wad of notes carried in his breast pocket, and he and Laurie dined at the best restaurants, drank in exclusive bars and patronised the most expensive night clubs. Two months later Laurie saw his friend's picture in "The News of the World" under the caption "King of London Crooks Sentenced". As head of a flourishing gang he had been given twelve years hard labour by an Old Bailey judge for organising the wholesale theft of cars and burglaries in and about Central and Greater London. "A charming, most entertaining chap," was Laurie's comment on his criminally inclined friend, "never been to sea in his life and seven previous convictions for car theft and housebreaking but he certainly knew his way about the West End – I now know why. I suppose I should have been suspicious about his large bank roll, but I was impressionable and he was one of the most likeable, amusing and plausible fellows I ever met."

On another occasion he and an instructor took off in an old monoplane on a routine training flight over Salisbury Plain. Heavy fog closed in and after flying

around for some time trying unsuccessfully to locate the base aerodrome an emergency landing had to be made on another airfield. As Laurie climbed shakily from the aircraft on to the strange, muddy airstrip he breathed a deep sigh of relief. Turning to the instructor he offered his thanks. “That was really touch and go, sir. You certainly brought her down beautifully. Thank God I had such an experienced instructor with me. I have never been so scared of a landing in my life.”

“What do you mean?” his quaking companion looked at him in amazement. “I’m not an instructor. I thought you were. I’m just a pupil pilot like you!”

Laurie was never to gain his coveted “wings” or see combat action in France. The war ended when he was no more than halfway through his flying course and he returned home to Cape Town and the problems of choosing a career without ever having made a solo flight.

Apart from a few local air trips in the old army surplus training plane used by his friend Frank Solomon for giving the Cape Town public ten minute ‘flips’ at so much a head after the war-during the last of which the plane ran out of petrol and crash-landed on a tree-top knocking every ounce of breath out of Laurie’s body and nearly breaking his nose – he was not to set foot in an aeroplane again for twenty-one years, until he joined the South African Air Force in 1939 and was

flown to the Middle East in a military Avro Anson to take up duty as a ground lieutenant in Cairo.

Ever since his Royal Flying Corps days he distrusted flying and could never be prevailed upon to consider this form of travel later on. "I know too much about it," he clarified his reluctance to soar through the air, "and there is still a hell of a lot that can go wrong. If I flew in a modern airliner I would, in my imagination, be in the pilot's seat and manipulating the controls the whole damn time and I would find it impossible to relax for a second and enjoy the flight. I have lost too many friends in the air. Pilots are only human. and are subject to human mistakes. When they make errors they not only kill themselves but take a whole plane-load of passengers with them. I can see no logic in chancing the hazards of flying when there are safe and comfortable trains and ocean liners to take one from place to place without a minute's anxiety."

Laurie would quote Saint-Exupery's book, "Wind, Sand and Stars", to support his gloomy views on flying. "Saint-Exupery, an old French civil airline pilot with vast experience wrote, in my opinion, the greatest of all books on aviation. Others, such as Ernest Gann, are good air-theme novelists, but 'Wind, Sand and Stars' is the classic work on flying. Turn to the dedication and you will see that

Saint-Exupery has paid tribute to the airline pilots of America and their dead, in other words, those killed and bereaved in flying accidents.

“If this is not enough to put one against air travel, I don’t know what is. I shudder at the thought of jumbo jets – flying barns guaranteed to massacre two hundred people at one go – and would rather not travel at all if this was the only means of transport.”

It was nine years after the end of World War I that Laurie, now a reporter covering the law courts, parliamentary sessions and special news stories for his Cape Town newspaper, first became “Uncle” Laurie to me and was to assume the important role of fatherly friend which was to endure to the end of his days. At first my feelings of resentment against Laurie were quick in formulation, increased to a maximum during my school days when I harboured active thoughts of hostile dislike compounded by a sense of misplaced and illogical jealousy, then began to diminish as I attained the wisdom and understanding of mature adulthood and came to realise his great strength of character and lofty, uncompromising principles. I only really grew to like Laurie when at the age of seventeen my distrust gave way to respectful awareness of his kindly charm and emotional steadiness.

When my father left I had immediately gained by his departure by becoming the apple of my fond mother’s eye. Spoiled, indulged far beyond the boundaries of



normal proportion, I was all too aware that my mother's whole life revolved about my capricious whims, selfish wishes and unreasonable desires and that I held the ego-satisfying, if psychologically unhealthy, position of king-pin at home.

I gloried in the absolute power I wielded and used it with the inconsiderateness of spoilt and thoughtless childhood. I became a thorough little monster wrapped up in my own selfseeking goals and was urgently in need of strict male discipline to cut me down to size.

Then, out of the blue, Laurie appeared on the scene of my wayward bliss to pose an unexpected threat to the foundations of my uncontrolled wilfulness. Another male had entered my mother's life! I was to be dispossessed. I quailed at the thought of unfair, uninvited competition for my mother's affection, interest and indulgent self-sacrifice. My fear turned to resentment, my resentment to dislike. I suffered nightmares that my mother might marry Laurie and that I would be landed with a stepfather whom I did not need or like; that she would be lost to me forever.

In later years, when I became aware that he and my mother were lonely and might be more settled and fulfilled in a more intimate and permanent companionable relationship, I encouraged them to marry and live as man and wife. Laurie had

always wished to marry my mother and proposed on numerous occasions when both were younger and had not yet become set in their ways. But my mother could not bring herself to consider such a step. "We are both dyed-in-the-wool individualists and I value my freedom far too much to give it up just to have a man around," she weighed the gains and losses of matrimony. "I admire Laurie and am terribly fond of him. Should anything happen to him I don't know what I'd do. But I could never seriously think of marrying him and subordinating myself to his outlook and wishes. Our marriage would never last, but our friendship will. There is only one person I could be married to, that is your father. I could never be happy married to anyone else, even to old Laurie who is a marvellous character and the salt of the earth."

At the age of thirty-two my mother, a confirmed student at heart, decided to become a doctor. Laurie, when informed of her plans to devote six years to the study of medicine at the University of Cape Town, set his face stonily against her intended project and would not be swayed by logical argument or my mother's appeals to reason from trying at every opportunity to dissuade her from such an unnecessary foolish and time-wasting action, even though she made it plain that once having qualified she had no intention whatsoever of actually practising medicine.

Not being studiously inclined himself, he was incapable of appreciating my mother's need for academic learning simply for learning's sake. Although he admired the medical profession and considered doctors possibly the most necessary members of society, he thought it absurd that a woman of my mother's years and financial independence should engage herself in the long ordeal of medical study when she had so many alternatives for enjoying herself and taking life easy. My mother, however, made up her own mind. Despite his constant melancholy head-shaking she refused to be brow-beaten, registered as a medical student and for the next six years applied herself wholeheartedly to her university course.

As time went by he came to accept her medical studies as an important aspect of my mother's life. Year by year as she progressed along the difficult road past anatomy, obstetrics, psychiatry and toxicology to her degree, Laurie's admiration for her disciplined, unwavering application to her studies turned his initial opposition to enthusiastic encouragement and his original cynicism to a deep self-absorption with her medical school happenings and tales of hospital life. There was no prouder or more delighted person in the graduation hall than Laurie the day my mother, in black gown and scarlet-edged hood, received the coveted parchment admitting her to the admirable brotherhood of those entitled to heal the sick as a bachelor of medicine and surgery.

In later years Laurie was to appreciate my mother's years of toil and her degree to the full and he wondered how he could ever have been so short-sighted and unreasonable about her studies in the first place. Not only had he learned something about medicine by, as he put it, "practically going through the whole medical course step by step with her," but he found my mother's medical knowledge invaluable when checking the veracity of unlikely sounding medical stories he came across and which he desired to include in book chapters. The accuracy of the quasi-medical chapters in his books were all, he admitted afterwards, due entirely to my mother's careful professional scrutiny, criticism and advice, since after she qualified he would not think of publishing a medical view or an opinion of an old *boere* or herbal remedy unless my mother had vetted it and vouched for its legitimacy. And his volumes contained many such interesting and reliable snippets of popular folklore medicine.

Laurie never tired of saying that my mother by having qualified in medicine had saved him many hundreds of pounds and rands over the years. And he was perfectly correct. A chronic hypochondriac, he in his time suffered a great many minor physical ailments, real and imaginary, for which he required advice or treatment. My mother, naturally, became his medical adviser. There is nothing like having a doctor in the family, as Laurie and I became aware, and it was only after my mother's death when we were for the first time in the hands of strange

medical practitioners who viewed us as ignorant laymen to be told only what they though fit to tell us and no more, that we realised the extent to which we had taken my mother's medical wisdom and help so much for granted.

Over the span of forty-five years Laurie saw my mother at least once every day, failing in this only during the war years when he was on active service or when he was away on a trip or expedition. And most week-ends saw us all together at Blaauwberg Strand, setting out on car drives to the country or, in the early days, yachting in his boat on Table Bay. But there was nothing of the maudlin in our close association and my mother never tried to disguise the fact that although she held Laurie in the highest possible esteem, admired his many excellent virtues and would find it almost impossible to get along without him, she considered him the most down-to-earth and unromantic man she had ever known.

It was a standing arrangement for Laurie to visit my mother's house every evening at 6 o'clock for his pre-dinner drink of two brandies and soda. He was seldom a minute late in arriving – several of my mother's neighbours swore they could set their clocks by the sound of his small car labouring up the hill – and left for his dinner at a restaurant at precisely 6.50. At these times his mood would be completely unpredictable, sometimes gay and light-hearted, at others, depending upon the frustrations and difficulties of his day, ill-humoured, gruff and, as my

mother so aptly described it, “downright argumentative”. During the former occasions he was a joy to be with, a sparkling conversationalist with amusing stories and witty anecdotes to tell; during the latter he could be uneasy company with a tendency towards snappish irritability and unsympathetic and uncooperative stubbornness. We also had a standing arrangement to dine together two nights a week, one night at a restaurant of Laurie’s choice at which he played host, and one night at my mother’s house so that he could enjoy home cooking for a change. There were times, after years of this set drinks-and-dinner ritual, that my mother confided that she often found Laurie’s regular late afternoon visits something of a tie. And yet she would under no circumstances ever put him off even though she might have wished to occupy herself some other way on a particular evening. Laurie always came first – second only to me – in my mother’s kind consideration.

Laurie, a shrewd psychologist, never once tried to usurp my mother’s authority as far as my upbringing was concerned, nor did he ever attempt to take over the tricky function of a father. I can recall only one instance in our long relationship in which he disciplined me directly, and in immediate retrospect I could see that his action was completely justified. I was twelve years old and had checked my mother abominably. Losing his temper, he slapped me hard across the ear. More shocked than hurt I dissolved into tears of volcanic anger and declared in pent-up, suddenly released bitterness to my anguished mother that I would never bestow the affectionate title of “Uncle” on Laurie again as long as I lived.

And yet there is no doubt at all that “Uncle” Laurie was the primary source of indirect influence on my general education, happiness and well-being. I shudder to think how I might have turned out had he not been at my mother’s side as gentle confidant and counsellor. Working always through my mother with subtle suggestion and intelligent, clear-headed guidance for the determination of my future course, Lawrence Green was to present me with the most valuable and precious of all his generous gifts – ideas of self-discipline, humility and manners. It was only later in life that I realised how much I had benefited from his perspicacity, his unswerving sense of fair and decent play and his high code of ethics. I grew to admire him as a person, to respect his judgements and, in many respects, to identify myself with and emulate his tall ideals and simple philosophy for sound, contented living.

Laurie seldom saw anything of my mother in the evening after dinner. Finding no enjoyment in the cinema or at other forms of local entertainment he could, when at home in Cape Town, except for the regular two evenings a week “family” dinner dates with us, rarely be wooed from his easy chair and early-to-bed nights, although his nocturnal habits were vastly different when he was in London, Paris, Rome or Madrid, when there was no keeping him inside a hotel bedroom after nightfall. The cities of Europe always transformed him into, to use his own words, “a veritable Good Time Charley – the last of the big spenders”, and most evenings would find him, after an expensive dinner at a first-class restaurant, in the best seat at the theatre, the ballet, a high-class music hall or at the opera. He enjoyed classical ballet and grand opera without understanding much about either. His musical

knowledge and appreciation was generally limited to the popular and lowbrow as was his understanding of fine and sculptural art. But he knew what he liked and could never be influenced from his own course of enjoyment by the views of others who considered themselves musical or artistic know-alls.

“I can’t bear amateur performers of any kind, and that’s the only sort there are in Cape Town,” he told my mother on the infrequent occasions she invited him to take her to local theatrical productions. “In Europe stage performers must be of the highest standard or they just don’t make the grade. Here the theatre is a dreary waste of time and I refuse to be dragged out at night for a dull and unamusing evening.” In this respect my mother thought him a hide-bound stick-in-the-mud which, I am afraid to say, he was, and complained that he was not much of a companion to her in later life. “Laurie is becoming so damned wrapped up in himself,” she confided her sadness at his unwillingness to escort her to social and entertainment functions on which she had set her heart, “that I wonder whether we really have much in common nowadays. But he was never like this when he was younger, had he been I would never have thrown in my lot with him. Then he was quite a gay bird and he and I enjoyed ourselves getting out at nights. But he has now become a theatrical snob and I am getting a little tired of his constant eulogies of the standard of entertainment in England and Europe. If I had my time over I doubt that I would take on Laurie as a friend again.” She did not really mean this, but there were times when my mother, driven to hand-wringing disappointment at Laurie’s insensitivity to her needs for a more socially active



life, would complain vehemently at his dull, set outlook and obstinately selfish attitudes.

Over the years my mother learned that there was little joy in having Laurie escort her to the cinema. Since there were few films which interested him he made little attempt when at the pictures to conceal his boredom and discomfort, constantly complaining about the lack of leg-room, the smoky atmosphere, the futility of the supporting programme, and banging the armrests of his seat in a restless reflex movement throughout the feature film. My mother, an ardent cinema fan, liked to discuss the films she had seen during the drives home. Laurie refused, for some reason, to indulge her in this and maintained an annoying and stubborn silence whenever she activated such a topic. This peculiar attitude on his part always infuriated my mother to the point of near-hysteria and on the few occasions they set off to the cinema together it could be accurately predicted that they would end their evening out in strained and awkward silence with Laurie haughtily requesting my mother at the front door never to ask him to the pictures again, and my mother vowing forcefully that she never would.

Laurie was tone deaf, a disability which made his preference for musical entertainment difficult to understand. To hear him attempting to recall and reproduce a tune that caught his fancy (which he was inclined to do when in a gay, responsive mood) by off-key humming or whistling was excruciating to the

ear, and he was often bewildered as to why his interpretation of a musical theme had not been instantly recognised by others when he burst into nasal, unrhythmical song.

To him, Danny Kaye was the greatest male performer, second only to Charlie Chaplin as the world's finest comedian. So much so that Laurie often used the clever comic as a childish sop to my mother whenever she suggested that he take her to a local entertainment. "I don't really fancy that type of thing," he put her off disarmingly, "it's not quite in my line, you know. But when Danny Kaye comes out here again I promise we will be in the best front seats at the Alhambra Theatre on opening night, and we'll go out to a really good dinner beforehand."

This threadbare, rather silly ploy never failed to provoke and start my mother off and the resulting exchange of heated words usually ended with Laurie grabbing his hat and stalking furiously from the house and my tearful mother promising that this was the certain end of their relationship, that she wished never to see him again. But by the next day the rift would be completely mended and the name of Danny Kaye would not be mentioned in the house again until the next time my mother forgetfully suggested that Laurie take her to a Cape Town stage show.

Both my mother and Laurie, I think, actually enjoyed this air-cleaning verbal sparring, or else each would have taken pains to avoid such situations knowing

well that danger loomed, which neither ever did. After each such brief emotional upheaval when my mother and he had had time to dissect and analyse the trite humour of it all, their affectionate relationship was back to normal and seemed on every occasion more loving and trusting than before.

There was no one to touch Gracie Fields as a stage personality and singer, according to Laurie. He had seen her in “Flora Dora” while in New York in the early nineteen-thirties and fell under her spell. “To hear the greatest female star of all time singing ‘Sally’, one of the best songs ever written, is an experience I would not have missed for anything. There is no one to touch Gracie, she had style and personality. And what a voice! I wish you could have seen ‘Flora Dora’; that was a show and it knocked audiences for a loop. I also saw ‘Manhattan Mary’ with Eddie Kantor. There was another great show for you. Would you believe it, the Mayor of New York, Jerry Walker, actually had a small walk-on part as the Mayor of New York. This could only happen in the States. The Americans are the only ones who can put on a musical, and Broadway productions are the most outstanding for lavishness and pretty girls.”

It is doubtful whether he knew the names of many other public entertainers than Danny Kaye, Charlie Chaplin, Gracie Fields, Eddie Kantor, Josephine Baker and Maurice Chevalier. Three of his favourite musicals were “Hit the Deck”, “Show

Boat” and “Chu Chin Chow” which he had seen with their original casts during his only trip to America after World War I and which he never forgot, and he was prone to date himself by harking back to these productions whenever the conversation turned to current, more contemporary musical presentations. In this respect my mother could not be faulted for accusing him of living in the past and boring his listeners with his frequent references to the out-of-date and hackneyed musical hits of yesteryear. But he could never be broken of this corny habit.

Laurie was usually unimpressed by modern musicals even when he saw them with their original casts and settings in London (he loathed every second of “Flower Drum Song”, slept through “Hello Dolly” and walked out of “The Sound of Music” halfway) and could not find much to arouse his enthusiasm in such smash-hit productions as “Oklahoma!” or “Annie Get Your Gun”, except for one song from the latter, “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better”, which he said was clever as it so aptly emphasised the vicious competitiveness of modern-day thinking.

Together we attended a West End performance of “West Side Story”. The racy American dialogue amused him but he expressed deep disappointment at the music and lyrics. “My Fair Lady” at Drury Lane, he conceded, was first-rate entertainment although he preferred Shaw’s straight play, “Pygmalion”, from

which the musical was adapted, but Rex Harrison in the part of Professor Higgins, great actor that he might well be, could never compare with the appeal, charm and stage presence of Gracie Fields in the old “Flora Dora”.

Once, while in London together he took me to see Sir Laurence Olivier in a straight play titled “Rhinoceros” – one of those plays carrying a hidden message directed at social conscience and well larded with heavy symbolism – at a West End theatre. It was to my mind a bad play, difficult to follow and the wrong vehicle for an actor of Olivier’s stature, and Laurie and I soon lost the thread and were bored throughout. On leaving the theatre Laurie, who did not know one actor from another no matter how famous, apologised for arranging such a wasted evening. “A dreadful play,” he remarked with neat, unwitting understatement, “but that actor fellow was quite good. He might possibly make a name for himself on the stage in time”

I once asked him whether he had ever thought of writing a play. “Not for a second.” he laughed at the thought. “Plays, like novels, are highly specialised forms of writing and although a lot of people are trying to write them only a few ever see the light of day. One has to be completely au fait with the theatre, acting technique and the technical side of stage-craft before one can think of play-writing. It is essentially for the well initiated, and comparatively few writers have

the required combination of writing ability and sound knowledge of stagecraft to turn out a successful play. Even when he does the playwright is up against too many production difficulties, backers must be found to put up the money and only the best plays have a chance of being produced since, in London and New York at any rate, there are too many plays chasing too few theatres.

“A friend of mine once slammed the cash register with his first attempt, a comedy called ‘Potiphar’s Wife’, which had great success and brought him in a fair amount of money. But, although he tried for years afterwards to write another, all his attempts were failures. He was only a one-play man as it turned out. I also knew John Osborne, became friendly with him on a ship voyage from England, a most able and engaging character who was a great favourite with the ladies on board. John achieved world fame with his ‘Look Back in Anger’ and although he wrote several fine plays later, none were quite as good or as popular as his first masterpiece. I found it hard to discuss playwriting with Osborne. It appeared to me that he had become jaded with the tough job of drama-writing and was reluctant to talk about his literary achievements. There are many young would-be playwrights who are simply wasting their time by trying to turn out theatrical work; most have little chance of even a modicum of success. My advice to them is to turn whatever literary talents they might have to other forms of writing –

magazine work or even books – which is not quite so highly demanding and competitive.”

In his younger days and mine Laurie’s love of the sea crystallised into his hearty yachting activities. Later I was to sail with him in Table Bay in small boats he owned, but long before this he became a member of the new Table Bay (later the Royal Cape) Yacht Club and a regular crew member of *Innisfellen*, a large, locally famous cutter owned by equally renowned “Skipper” Beauclerk Upington K. C., a hard drinking, irascible bachelor and legendary criminal lawyer with an enviable reputation at both sorts of bar. Upington’s love of sailing and genuine seamen was rivalled only by Laurie’s, and Laurie grew to like and respect him above all sailing men. It was at this stage that Laurie was to make lasting friendships which endured throughout his life and the lives of his *Innisfallen* shipmates – George Miller, Henry Hope, Wilfred Copenhagen, André Steytler and later Scott Haigh – and others whose friendship meant so much to him and which Laurie cherished with pride and sincerity.

To Laurie his sailing days were the happiest of his life. “I hated newspaper work,” he often thought back nostalgically on old times, “and I lived for the weekends when I could escape from my office desk and the city and put to sea in *Innisfallen* with the impeccably dressed ‘Skipper’ in his yachting cap and brass-

bound blazer at the helm. These were good times, free from worry and care with the companionship of wonderful shipmates, strenuous yacht races in the bay, long leisurely cruises round Cape Point to Simonstown, out into the blue past Dassen Island and up the coast to peaceful Langebaan and Saldanha.

“The ‘Skipper’ was one of the finest men I ever knew, one of nature’s true gentlemen who fitted in with any sort of company, from eminent judges and cabinet ministers to gnarled old windjammer sailormen and grimy stokers from rusty coal burners lying out in the bay. He was in his element when drinking with his crew at the bar of the old Queen’s Hotel in Dock Road after a hard sail, listening to the talk of seamen from all parts of the globe and holding a motley audience of rough seafaring folk spellbound with his humorous anecdotes of his court room and sailing experiences.

“The ‘Skipper’ liked asking strangers to guess his profession. Once he asked a weathered deck-hand this question and was delighted and flattered at the answer. After looking the ‘Skipper’ up and down for a few seconds the old seaman made his pronouncement; ‘You look jus’ like one of them bosuns off one of them windjammers on the Orstralian run’. Another time when the ‘Skipper’ was drinking in the Queens Hotel he noticed a man studying him intently from the other end of the bar counter. Intrigued, the ‘Skipper’ approached the man and



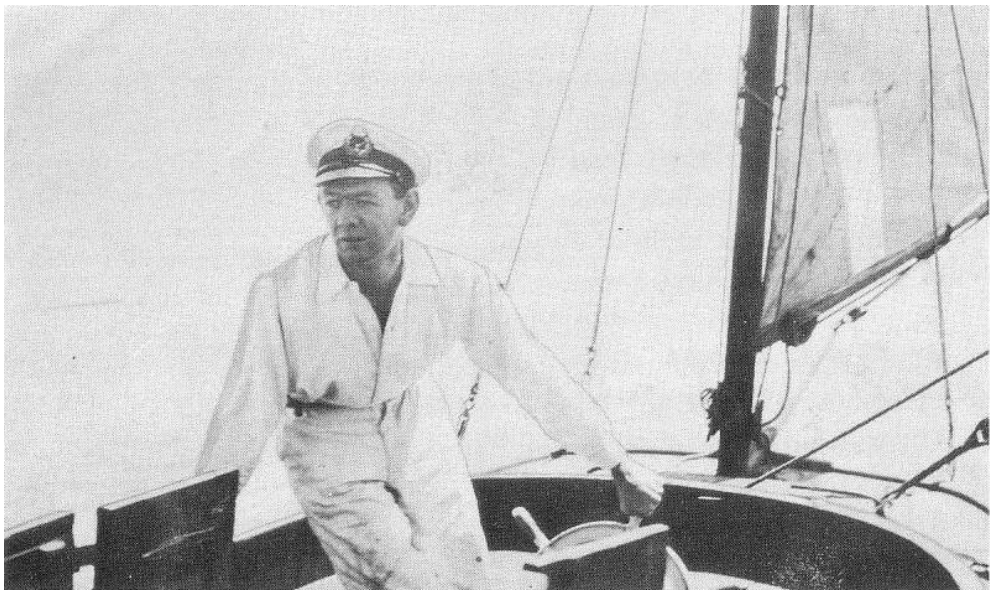
enquired what he was looking at. 'I'm the public hangman and interested in my work,' he replied, 'and I was just estimating what drop I would give a fellow your height.' The 'Skipper' asked him to join us and insisted on standing drinks all round."

It was a great blow to Laurie when Upington died and *Innisfallen* changed hands to be lost at sea some time later. Laurie's fond memories of the "Skipper" and his fine ship persisted to the end of his life and a large framed picture of *Innisfallen* entering Cape Town yacht basin under full sail always had pride of place on his bedroom wall. The "Skipper" was well known for his dry sense of humour – once as a guest at a banquet in honour of the Lord Mayor of London, when called upon to propose a toast, he stood, raised his glass and said "To absent friends, among them the wine steward who has not been to this end of the table for over half-an-hour" and his easy going temperament which endeared him to Laurie. Only once did the crew of *Innisfallen* experience Upington's deep displeasure. They were spending the weekend at Langebaan and returned to the yacht late at night after an evening's solid drinking at the Panoramic Hotel. While boarding the yacht the "Skipper" lost his footing and fell heavily, legs astride the dinghy's bow. In dreadful agony he was rushed to hospital by ambulance.

A witty member of the crew took it upon himself to write out and tack to the saloon bulkhead a card bearing a warning notice. This read: “Mind Your Balls”. Upton returned from hospital, discovered the card which Laurie and his friends had forgotten to take down and for once failed to appreciate the humour of a situation.

Later, Laurie decided to branch out as a yacht owner himself. His savings were meagre but by scraping together what cash he had he acquired his first boat, the small cabin yawl *Amitia* which he berthed in the shadow of the Clock Tower in the old section of the Cape Town docks.

But *Lulu* was the boat with which he was to become most closely associated by his sailing companions. Named in honour of my mother, the five-ton, twenty-five foot ketch – the first of her class which Laurie ordered from a leading firm of Cape Town boatbuilders, was for years his prized, most loved and used possession. I remember as a small boy, being present at the launching. As my mother smashed the customary bottle of champagne across her bows and jaunty *Lulu* slid quietly down the slipway into the oily water of the Victoria Basin to the cheers of Laurie’s yacht club friends, there were tears in his eyes as he placed his arm affectionately around her shoulders and whispered with tender emotion, “Dear Lulu, my dearest Lulu”.



Laurie in his early twenties at the helm of his small cabin yawl "Amitia" in Table Bay.

Laurie had laid on a huge quantity of liquor for the occasion. Lulu was towed round to the yacht basin with an unlikely “crew” of twenty or so convivial celebrants aboard. For some this was their first sail ever. For one at least who lost his balance and took a header fully dressed over the side and proclaimed drunkenly on surfacing that he objected to water with his drink and would never go to sea again, it was probably the last.

Although a competent yachtsman, Laurie could never be classed as a great helmsman; those who sailed with him recognised his potential as a seaman but thought his strong grain of caution inhibited him from exercising the necessary element of venturesome enterprise which distinguishes the great yachtsmen from the average. But what he lacked in sailing skill he certainly made up for in keenness, and for those who had mastered the tricky art of sail he had unbounded admiration.

Among these was Harry Pidgeon, possibly the greatest and best known single-handed yachtsman with whom Laurie became friendly when Pidgeon moored his *Islander* nearby on one of his several lone trips round the world. Laurie was fascinated with Pidgeon’s philosophy for rough, solitary living, and spent many hours in his company absorbing Pidgeon’s deep knowledge of the sea and listening to the stories of his lonely life on the oceans of the world. “A curious

person,” Laurie said of Pidgeon, “but then one would have to be to follow the sort of life he has chosen. But what a magnificent sailor! He cared nothing for food or the niceties of society, lived mainly on rice and water and was one of the few really contented men I have met. He hated landsmen visiting him on his boat and complained that the only question they ever asked was what he did about a lavatory while on a cruise. This question, he said, was asked *ad nauseum* whenever he put in at a strange port and was besieged by gawking landlubbers and ignorant newspaper reporters.

“I came across him once dressed in a shabby, paint-stained blue suit, collar and tie and scuffed leather sandals, painting the side of his yacht. He told me the British Consul had invited him to lunch and that he was not keen on going. Sure enough, when the Consul arrived to pick him up, Pidgeon went along quite unselfconsciously to the posh Sea Point Queen’s Hotel in his paint-splattered clothes and worn sandals.”

Those were the days when Laurie frequently brought home interesting and strange people he fell in with at the docks to meet my mother and me. I recall a Danish family, a tall, blonde father, slim mother, two blue-eyed girls in pigtails and a sunbronzed boy of eight, who were sailing round the world in their three-masted barque, arriving unexpectedly for supper and spending the night in our spare

bedrooms. Their talk of strange, exotic landfalls and idyllic life under sail fired my romantic twelve-year-old imagination and I pleaded with my mother and Laurie to be allowed to go along when the adventurous family up-anchored the next day. I also fell desperately in love with the eldest daughter whom I presented with a slate as a parting gift. She promised faithfully to write from Sydney, but she never did.

Laurie once brought home a member of the Glass family of Tristan da Cunha. The Glass' had accommodated him in their primitive stone cottage when he called at the island as a passenger in a British battle-cruiser some years previously, and when the head of the family arrived in Cape Town for the first time for medical treatment, he was anxious to return the hospitality. The old islander had never seen cars, tall buildings, shops or cinemas before. Laurie, my mother and I took him to the Alhambra Theatre to study his reactions. There was little to observe until the cinema organist rose seated at his instrument from the orchestra pit. Then Glass required all our convincing that the organist had not emerged from the depths of hades before he could be stopped from bolting in terror from the theatre. When asked how he thought Laurie was looking since their last meeting on Tristan five years before, the islander took his time deliberating before uttering in the quaintly spoken English used on the island, his reply which Laurie was to

incorporate in his large fund of stories about himself: “Mr Green’s a lot fatter ‘n he woz when he woz last on the oiland”.

And there were many others, writers and seamen, journalists and single-handed yachtsmen, artists and big game hunters, mountaineers and explorers, some to later achieve world-wide fame, who came to our house as Laurie’s guests and who added to the expanding orbit of my general knowledge with new ideas and tales of events of which I was unaware. Many became my lasting friends. And Laurie could have bestowed upon me no more precious heritage than the desire to make and nurture warm and long-lived friendships.

### CHAPTER 3

#### WAR AND SPIES

*There's but the twinkling of a star  
Between a man of peace and war.*

Samuel BUTLER.

It was 1939 and war clouds had thickened and darkened over Europe. Was Hitler to hurtle the world over the edge into the abyss of wholesale conflagration? Could Neville Chamberlain and his French ally divert the madman of Germany from the inevitable collision course towards which the Third Reich militarism was swiftly hurtling?

The answers to these and similar “cliff-hanging” questions were vital to Laurie Green’s newspaper the “Cape Argus” which prided itself on being first with the news. But reliable official communications were slow and too confused in coming through for the paper’s evening deadlines, and static picked up in the city office made it impossible for wireless listeners to follow the regular London news broadcasts clearly enough for inclusion in the newspaper’s early and later editions. And the “Cape Argus” simply had to know what was going on.

Laurie was deputed to keep a round the clock ear to a powerful radio set installed in quiet surroundings free from atmospheric interference and tuned permanently



to the B.B.C. and to make a shorthand note of all news items which were to be 'phoned immediately to his news editor as they came across the ether. He chose the calm atmosphere of the lounge of my mother's Sea Point house for this delicate operation and early one morning a band of wireless technicians rigged their high vantage aerials and positioned the compact listening apparatus on a sturdy desk complete with scribbling pads and a dozen sharpened pencils, between the red brick fireplace and the window looking out towards the blue, untroubled sea which would soon be patrolled by depth-charge-carrying mine-sweepers and armed patrol boats.

Laurie was worried as he sat down in the swivel chair and toyed gingerly with the illuminated dials to bring the set on station, and his gloom deepened as, day by day, late into the night, his pencil hurried over the white scribbling pads, recording in quick, accurate shorthand the sombre tidings from the emotionless, matter-of-fact B.B.C. newscasts.

When Neville Chamberlain's quavering voice filled our living room with the announcement that Britain and Germany were at war, Laurie sat stunned for some seconds, then reached for the telephone, his fingers trembling in the dial holes, and conveyed the momentous tidings to the "Cape Argus". "Well, it's all over, the die is cast. Hell, I could do with a large brandy and soda." My mother

brought the drinks tray and Laurie lit another of his thirty-five a day cork-tipped cigarettes. “Ghastly news but not unexpected, I suppose. I never thought I’d see another war in my lifetime, though,” he sat back, sipped his brandy and shook his head in disbelief.

“What happens now?” my ashen-faced mother, as dismayed as Laurie, came across the room and kissed him and me fondly on the cheek. “Does this mean that you and John will join up and fight?” Her voice broke and she struggled to keep back tears of fearful foreboding.

“It’s too early yet to tell what will happen.” Laurie stood at the open window looking at the sea with a thoughtful expression on his face. “It’s all so awful to contemplate.

John and his friends may have to go, but I am thirty-nine, a bit past usual military age. I’ll need time to collect my thoughts – we all will.”

For a short while life continued as it always had, each going about or normal day-to-day business, each with the secret hope that the thing would fizzle out in peace before the fighting war got started. But as the news grew graver Laurie and I found ourselves discussing what branch of the service it would be best to join. I opted for the South African Navy, he, at his age, considered that his experience as a journalist and a senior flying cadet during the First World War

fitted him for a public relations or personnel job in the South African Air Force. His surmise proved correct. He applied for a commission and was allocated two “pips” as an administrative officer S.A.A.F. But Laurie as a desk officer was not happy at General Headquarters, Pretoria, where he found the routine paper work boring and unsatisfying. Knowing that because of his age he could never become a field combatant, he wanted desperately nonetheless to be nearer the centre of action.

“Being tied to a desk and keeping office hours in Pretoria is not my idea of being at war,” he wrote in one of his weekly letters to my mother after his first few months of compiling statistics and filing staff records in triplicate. “But I don’t have the courage at the moment to emulate a young pilot friend of mine who has just engineered his transfer to the war zone by sheer intelligent cunning. This lieutenant, tied to a desk job here the same as I am, moved heaven and earth to get to the Middle East. Unfortunately for him he was good at this work at G.H.Q. and his superiors turned down all his applications. But this man had a brain and used it. Whenever he knew that a top brass officer was coming to General Headquarters on inspection he stationed himself in the doorway of his *office*, leaning nonchalantly against the door frame. As the high-ranking officer came down the passage he watched his approach with a pleasantly idiotic smile on his face, snapped to attention as the red-tabber passed and, having resumed his slouch

against the door post, vacantly studied the brass's progress away down the corridor.

This soon got on people's nerves and led to certain questions. When asked by senior officers why he always seemed to be standing about propping up his office door at inconvenient times he replied innocently: 'Very little work to do, sir, I find it difficult to fill in my time here.' His trick worked and I have just signed his draft papers for his transfer to an air squadron in the Western Desert."

Laurie's continual string-pulling also, to his joy, later had the desired result and he was soon to follow the young airman North to the Egyptian war theatre. "I am at last off to war," he wrote in jubilation, "only to G.H.Q., Cairo, as a base wallah, to be sure, but at least I will be among real fighting men and will, perhaps, be given the chance of getting out into the desert, flying one or two missions with the boys and seeing something of the war." He managed to accomplish all three of his wishes, but it was a certain aspect of his normally mundane office duties at G.H.Q. which really interested and intrigued him.

Here he was again involved with personnel and general records and statistics, but now with a difference. "I was amazed to discover that in Cairo I had access to all sorts of top secret files, many of them containing real dynamite," he told me after our demobilisation. "I could often hardly believe my eyes when I read the confidential information and comments regarding certain people, many of them

well-known in Egypt and South Africa, recorded in those thick folders. They made absorbing reading and I really took off my hat to our security chaps for the thoroughness of the data they collected on those whose loyalty was suspect. They had them all well-taped and categorised and an extremely careful watch was kept on all their activities, I assure you. In a way, I suppose, I was actually a member of the secret service and it was this part of my job which aroused my interest in espionage and those responsible for countering it.”

Shortly after assuming duty in Cairo he was to meet his first official spy-catcher in the flesh. And, said Laurie, there was definitely no lack of meat. “Several British W.A.A.F.’s had been murdered under suspicious circumstances in Alexandria,” Laurie told me after the war of his meeting and friendship with a real-life James Bond, “and it was thought that these murders were the work of enemy agents or those unsympathetic to the Allied cause. British intelligence sent out a travelling professional assassin from London to track down and deal with these killers, and he and I had many a drink together at the Continental-Savoy bar and Sheppeard’s Hotel. He was one of the fattest men I had ever seen. He weighed over four hundred pounds and whenever he flew anywhere by aircraft an armrest had to be removed so that he could occupy two seats; he was too obese to fit comfortably into one. But despite his bulk he was as agile as a monkey.

“He was a softly-spoken, highly cultured, cheroot-smoking man with an Oxford history degree and a liking for Dickens and quoting Longfellow. He was not an army man and in his staid, well-cut Savile Row suits and narrow-brimmed hats he could have passed for a successful London stockbroker, which was exactly what he was in civilian life. British Intelligence flew him all over the world when it required his specialised services in any particular place. After completing an assignment he departed as quietly as he had come and returned to London to report and for further briefing.

“I asked him how he liked his macabre job and whether he was ever plagued by conscience after eliminating an adversary. He was surprisingly sanguine and candid about his bizarre activities. He did not consider himself a murderer in any way, but a front-line soldier fighting the war by carrying out the orders for which he happened to have special abilities. He confided that he favoured the knife as the instrument for his grotesque operations and that he had a fine collection to suit all his various requirements. He preferred a simple *modus operandi* for taking his victims by surprise and giving them no chance to escape or strike back.

“The method was to shadow his quarry and wait for him to enter a public lavatory. This, he admitted, often took time but was completely fool-proof and easy. The assassin, after a few minutes to allow his prey to get settled, knocks on

the lavatory door repeatedly until the disturbed and exasperated victim opens it to tell him to clear off. Being completely unsuspecting and at a distinct disadvantage, his stomach offers an excellent target for the sharp stiletto which is quickly shoved in and ripped upwards, all in one energetic movement. The victim rarely has time to realise what is happening or to cry out and the whole exercise is performed in a few seconds with little fuss or bother. The assassin leaves unobtrusively, quietly closing the lavatory door behind him on his grisly work. By the time the body is discovered he is probably already winging his way back to London and exchanging polite banalities with fellow passengers over a well-earned whisky and soda.

“I never found out whether my acquaintance tracked down and accounted for the Alexandria W.A.A.F. killers in an Egyptian public convenience – after a few days he disappeared from his usual hotel bar haunts and I never saw him again – but I expect he did. He struck me as a most highly skilled and competent in his job.”

Neutral Egypt was full of spies and informers during the war and Laurie savoured the cloak-and-dagger atmosphere in which he found himself in Cairo. Nomadic Arabs wandering about the desert behind the Allied and enemy lines were constant bearers of Intelligence to both sides and were a source of great concern to the Germans and British alike. Laurie was impressed with the speed with which

they obtained their accurate information. He remembered the time when camped out in the desert near a forward battle area he noticed a small patch of thin, unripe wheat being cultivated by a band of ragged Arabs. He awoke one morning to find that the whole crop had been harvested prematurely during the night and that the Arabs had moved silently off. Laurie wasted no time in packing up his gear and clearing out himself.

“Those Arabs somehow knew the Germans were preparing an advance,” he said with awe, “and I was warned to get the hell away while there was still time. Sure enough, that day the enemy overran our forward positions, including the area in which our tents were pitched. I don’t know how or from where the Arabs received their information – we knew nothing about an intended enemy attack – but if they had not cut their wheat and vanished mysteriously in the dark, I might well have spent the rest of the war behind the wire of a prisoner of war camp.” Thanks to the Arabs he lived to fight another day.

“There were many strange characters knocking about Cairo and Alexandria in those days,” Laurie looked back on the people he met during his war-time career in the Middle East. “Of every conceivable nationality, many of them were passing on to the enemy bits of information picked up from careless talk in bars and on hotel terraces, a lot of it entirely worthless, but a good deal undoubtedly of



importance. Some had no loyalty to either the Axis or the Allies and had no compunction in working for both sides as double agents for the payment they received. One never quite knew who of one's friends might be in the pay of South African or British Intelligence or who among one's acquaintances was possibly working for the enemy or for us and the Germans at the same time.

"I remember one night having a few drinks with a party of army and civilian friends in Sheppard's Hotel. One of our number, a British Colonel who had a bit too much to drink, made one or two indiscreet observations about our war effort. A short time later he was stripped of his rank and returned quietly to England in disgrace. One of the party – I never discovered who – was obviously connected with military Intelligence and had reported the colonel's disparaging remarks. It was better to keep one's own counsel and carefully watch one's words in Egypt during the war."

After the war when on a trip to England, Laurie became friendly with Bernard Newman, the well-known English travel writer and author of several good spy books, who had served in British Intelligence and was able to tell him the truth about certain spy mysteries which had puzzled Laurie at the time. "There was little Newman did not know about the spy game," Laurie was genuine in his admiration for his fellow writer, "but he was unfortunately bound by the Official

Secrets Act and could only tell those incidences authorised by his Intelligence bosses; many of his best stories and strange experiences have remained untold.

“Intelligence people feel that old, well tried tricks of the trade may be used again in another war and they don’t want these methods exposed. The espionage business is a particularly dirty one and some of the procedures used to extract information and trap enemy agents are well below the belt and mean and it would never do to let writers embarrass officialdom by revealing their grimy espionage methods to the public. A man I knew wrote an excellent manuscript of a book called ‘The London Cage’ about his career as a senior British Intelligence officer in both world wars. It was full of good stuff, including a lot which is generally unknown about Rudolf Hess’ flight to England and his imprisonment in the Tower of London during World War II.

“When the Intelligence Section heard about this two agents descended on my friend’s flat, warned him about the Official Secrets Act and seized the manuscript which they took away. When it was eventually returned it had been well and truly filleted of all except the most innocuous and uninteresting details. The book was published in its mutilated form but it was just another orthodox spy book – a travesty of the original. But he, like Bernard Newman, was prepared to tell me many espionage secrets and I was fascinated to learn that some of the spy

episodes in which I was particularly interested were not at all what they seemed when they occurred.”

Laurie had his own theory as to the reason for the death of fair-haired cinema idol Leslie Howard after the plane in which he was a civilian passenger was mysteriously shot down by German fighters while on a flight from Lisbon to England. Lisbon, like Cairo and Alexandria, was a hot-bed of spies, agents and counter-agents employed by both sides during the Second World War. For various military and diplomatic reasons it suited the Allies and the Axis to allow regular commercial aeroplane flights between Portugal and England to continue while the air forces of both sides were locked in battle over the rest of Europe and in the sky above the Western Desert. These aircraft were never molested until the fateful day when German fighters suddenly appeared out of the clouds to blast the passenger-filled plane into the English Channel.

There were various official and semi-official views for this surprise attack but there has never been a clear German explanation for their unanticipated change in the unwritten gentlemen's agreement. Rumour had it that Howard was a valuable British Intelligence agent whom the Germans were anxious to destroy. The death of such a well-known, romantic public figure would, the Germans knew, be a blow to British and American morale, said others, and the Germans, no doubt,

jumped at the chance when they knew he was aboard the plane. Not so, opinioned many, the Germans had simply decided to wage total war and shoot down any undefended British planes they came across; or the German pilots had been in error and had blasted the Lisbon to London air ferry by mistake and Howard's flight had been the unlucky one.

Laurie disagreed with all these assumptions. "I had a friend on that flight," he clarified his reasons a short time after the war when we were fishing from the Blaauwberg rocks together, "a high-grade London businessman who was totally unconnected with the armed forces or the Intelligence Service. He caught the ill-fated aircraft from Lisbon to London after concluding an ordinary business trip to Madrid but, like Leslie Howard and the rest of the passengers and crew, never reached his destination.

"The significant fact about the whole episode is that my friend was the image of Anthony Eden, who was then British Foreign Secretary. He was the same height as Eden, had the same small clipped moustache and slightly protruding teeth, dressed in black jacket and striped trousers and wore a black 'Anthony Eden' homburg hat. German Intelligence in Lisbon had obviously mistakenly reported to Berlin that Eden had boarded the aircraft, and German fighter pilots in the area were instructed to crash the plane with Eden in it. The Germans were not after Howard at all. This is the most logical explanation for the tragedy, but for some reason or other it was pushed

aside when I suggested it to certain high-ranking Intelligence officers. Perhaps they had some security or diplomatic reason for not wishing the truth to come to light.”

Of all the excellent hotels Laurie patronised and came to know so well in his life of travelling about the world, Cairo's Continental-Savoy was the one which he came to know best of all. During his first few months in the Middle East, before he moved to less stately, more appropriate war-time quarters, he occupied a room with private bath at the Continental-Savoy and came to know its bars, crowded terraces, restaurants and night clubs as well as its staff and ever-changing clientele, with the intimacy of an old resident of years standing. Most of his war was “fought” in an atmosphere of plush luxury, he candidly pointed out afterwards, and this increased his respect for real fighting men who were braving the enemy and privation in shallow foxholes on the sandy wastes of the Western Desert, and he was a little ashamed of his comfortable quarters in the heart of Cairo well away from the sound of gunfire and bombs and of sudden death.

While staying at the Continental-Savoy Laurie, although unaware of it at the time, witnessed the first phase of the rounding up of an audacious ring of Nazi spies which was operating from a houseboat moored inconspicuously in the Nile at Cairo. This ambitious espionage project has been well documented in Leonard Mosley's book, “The Cat and the Mice”, published after the war, and is considered an object lesson in careful espionage planning and daring execution. Two German enemy agents in civilian clothes and with a large bag of Egyptian piastres were put down in the desert on the outskirts of Cairo by a long-range desert jeep and

simply made their way on foot unchallenged into the city. Here they hired one of the many houseboats moored on the Nile and installed a powerful transmitting set camouflaged inside a well-stocked drinks cabinet. It was as easy as that. Allied Intelligence officers were completely unaware of their presence in their midst and for some time the two young spies were passing on vital information to Rommel's desert headquarters with no Allied Intelligence questions being asked.

Hekmath Fathmy, a popular Egyptian belly-dancer at the Continental-Savoy cabaret, was the houseboat occupants' confederate and source of information. Although a mediocre belly-dancer, the attractive Hekmath was a great favourite with allied officers, some of them very high-ranking, and was always willing to join parties of celebrating officers and responsibly placed civilians at their tables after she had completed her nightly cabaret performance of belly manipulation to the nasal whining of flutes, the booming of drums and the tinkle of finger-cymbals. "I knew her well," Laurie told me in a letter in which he recounted the episode, "as I knew most of the Continental-Savoy staff and cabaret performers. She was no glamorous Mata Hari, but was clearly getting a good deal of information from her military contacts through their loose talk and her subtle pumping. This she passed right on to her friends on the houseboat. Her cabaret act wearied me because she was not a very good performer, but she was reasonably good-looking and had a nicely rounded figure and an engaging personality. I just

can't understand why our Intelligence people did not get on to her sooner, though. She was such an obvious suspect.

“One night as I returned to my hotel bedroom I saw a scuffle taking place in the corridor outside. The room next to mine was occupied by a British major. As I passed, he had Hekmath firmly by the arm and was trying to push her into his room. Hekmath was struggling and protesting but the major managed to shove her inside and close the door in my face. Ah, I thought, the lascivious major is getting Hekmath into his bedroom for an immoral purpose, and I dismissed the episode from my mind as having nothing to do with me. The next day I discovered that I had wronged the major in my thoughts. He was an Intelligence officer and had just collected the evidence he needed to apprehend the girl for suspected espionage. When I saw them tussling in the corridor I was actually witnessing her arrest for interrogation. The major soon broke her down and her houseboat friends were immediately taken into custody.”

As Egypt was a neutral country during the war none of the three spies were executed. Laurie never saw or heard of Hekmath again and often wondered what happened to her. “I have seen many belly-dancers since those Cairo days,” he looked back years afterwards, “in the cabarets of Algiers and Morocco, and I always hoped to run across her contorting her navel as she used to do at the old

Continental-Savoy and the Kit Kat Club. But I never have. A pity, I would have liked to have bought her a drink and heard her own story.”

Laurie, who remained a humble lieutenant until the last few months of the war when he was promoted to captain, was not yet the famous writer he was to become, and during his wartime Cairo days his relationship with several of his superior officers did not always run as smoothly as he wished. This was not surprising as Laurie, a scathing debunker of pomposity and posturing, was unable to conceal his critical amusement at the theatrical strutting of some of those in charge of his military destiny. A life-long champion of the underdog, he could see no reason to change his outlook and become a sycophant simply because he had joined the air force, and he was all too often at loggerheads with those who were in a position to make his life difficult and unpleasant. This they often did and there were times when Laurie wrote that he was frustrated and depressed in his job at General Headquarters. “There is a general here,” he wrote in one letter, “a real bastard who spends a good deal of his time standing on the hotel steps pulling up passing soldiers for not having their tunics buttoned at the neck. I’d love to point out to the old fool that most of the men he picks on have come back for a rest from fighting the Afrika Korps in the front line while he was sitting on his fat arse on the Continental-Savoy terrace mopping up whiskies and ogling women. Perhaps I will eventually pluck up the boldness to do so. How I despise



these jumped-up idiots. They could certainly take a leaf of humility from the great Lawrence of Arabia's book. I recently met a man at the Gezira Club who had been a military policeman in World War I. He told me how he had come across a soldier in full uniform but wearing a woollen scarf, carpet slippers and no regimental badges in a dark Cairo street late one night. He arrested the man for being improperly dressed and only when he had taken him to the lock-up did he discover that his prisoner was Colonel T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence was well known for his informality and could not be bothered with the petty trappings of rank or position. Here, indeed, was a man to be admired."

But until Laurie was appointed Press Officer to the South African Air Force – a job he found more to his liking than that of an administrative officer at G.H.Q. – his war effort was not only concerned with the exciting world of spies and counterspies. Much of his office work was of a dull and routine nature in which he found little stimulation. Having no head for figures, the endless statistics, coding and decoding of secret messages and interminable checking of store and supply estimates for which he was responsible, thwarted him completely. "A mathematician or accountant was required, not a journalist, and I had many disturbed nights wrestling with office problems. But no matter how unsatisfactorily I did the job, I could not for some time convince my air force chiefs that I was far better qualified for work requiring journalistic experience,

and I had to battle on with the help of kind service friends more adept at figures than I," he criticised the system after the war. "But there were others in the air force just as out of depth as I. At one stage, other ranks with university degrees were asked to apply for commissions. One of the air mechanics had a degree in agriculture and was immediately given a 'pip' and put in charge of maintenance of a desert airstrip. He never quite knew what he was expected to do but this did not seem to worry Air Headquarters in the least and he saw out the war supervising the sweeping and clearing of airfield runways."

A supply officer friend of Laurie's was once requested to estimate the amount of equipment lost during an Allied retreat. He complained that he was not sure how to set about so immense a task and promptly received a signal back from headquarters saying: "Just give an estimate of losses to the nearest million pounds." After the war Laurie included this anecdote in one of his books and had his name mentioned in the South African Parliament when an opposition member rose, book in hand, during a debate to emphasize angrily the extravagant manner in which the Government had conducted the war. "It was," Laurie agreed, "a hell of a way to win a war and, like the opposition member, I must confess that I often wondered just how we reached final victory."

Although he managed during brief leaves sometimes to relieve the monotony of his nine to five office paper-work and indulge his love for travel by scrounging airlifts to Palestine, the Lebanon and Cyprus, he longed for the day the war would end and he could return to his solitary walks on Blaauwberg beach and the writing of the books which were to make him South Africa's most prolific writer, the pattern for which he had already formulated in his mind. He promised himself that he would retire from work on the newspaper and keep himself by writing as soon as he could and he chafed that each month the war dragged on kept him that amount of time from his goal. He grew restless confined to Cairo headquarters and, although not directly involved, became increasingly dejected at the thought of the continued battles and violence taking place around him.

Once, while he was visiting a small desert town, a lone Italian fighter appeared from behind the sun and proceeded to strafe the few unsuspecting people in the streets. "He came over very low, not more than a hundred feet with his guns blazing and his engine roaring," Laurie remembered the attack. "Our A.A. guns opened up at once and scored a direct hit. The pilot bailed out, but at that height there was no chance of his parachute opening. He hit the ground with a bang like a rifle shot not more than fifty yards away from me. I had seen men killed before, but this time I vomited where I stood and felt sick for days afterwards. He was the enemy but he was also someone's son and probably someone's husband and

father. I was suddenly assailed by the dreadful realisation of the hopeless futility of it all.”

Part of Laurie’s duties at General Headquarters was to complete and sign route forms for air force personnel transferred from one unit to another. Of all his unspectacular military chores this was the one he liked least – he admitted later that he sighed inwardly whenever the high piles of white forms were placed before him for perusal and signature – and he paid scant, half-hearted attention to detail in hurriedly clearing his desk of these never-ending stacks of roneoed paper. His laxity once nearly landed him in severe difficulty with the military authorities, and it was only his quick thinking which helped him avoid the obvious unpleasantness for which he seemed destined.

A flight-sergeant transferred from a local base to an airfield in the Western Desert presented his route form for Laurie’s authorisation and rubber stamp. Laurie signed automatically without looking at it, returned it to the flight-sergeant with his good luck wishes and then put the matter out of his mind as he had done in the case of hundreds of other airmen who passed through his hands on postings to other units. As far as he was concerned the flight-sergeant had gone off to report to his new commanding officer as instructed, and Laurie turned his attention to other matters. Three months went by, then he received a visit from two poker-



Laurie liked nothing better than flying patrols with real fighting men Here he boards a bomber in the Western Desert in 1943.

faced military police officers. Had he any idea, they asked darkly, what had happened to the flight-sergeant? Laurie shook his head. How could he be expected to know? As far as he was aware the flight-sergeant was at work somewhere out in the desert at his new station. Laurie had merely signed his route form, given it back and had seen him leave the office.

The military policemen exchanged grim-visaged glances and told him differently. The flight-sergeant had not reported to his new commanding officer and had just been arrested in a Cairo bazaar dressed as a woman and in possession of three air force paybooks. As Laurie had signed and stamped the man's route form he was held directly responsible for the flight-sergeant's desertion and faced the prospect of a court martial. "I had the sinking feeling that I was really for the high jump this time," he realised the sinister implications of his situation. "Apparently I should have seen to it that I received route forms back from commanding officers as soon as transferred men reported to their new units. No one ever briefed me about this and God knows how many men I sent all over Egypt without bothering to check whether they ever arrived at their destinations. I spent many worrying days and nights waiting for the balloon to go up, I can tell you."

In desperation he sent for the flight-sergeant's personal file. "I read through the thick dossier carefully from cover to cover, looking for something that would get me off the hook with the military police," he said in a long letter to my mother.

“And, thank the Lord, I found it. On his medical report I came across a brief mention that the man had at one time suffered prostate trouble. I showed this to the military police and, using what medical knowledge I had and looking wise, drew their attention to the fact that prostate trouble often goes hand in hand with certain mental aberration. This, I explained, had undoubtedly caused the flight-sergeant’s mortifying behaviour. I recommended that a medical officer be asked to examine him before any disciplinary action was taken against me.

“The military policemen were impressed by my apparent medical knowledge and diagnosis. The flight-sergeant was eventually judged unfit for active service and was discharged from the air force. According to the doctor, I was in no way to blame for the man’s peculiar conduct since he was certainly emotionally unstable and should never have been accepted by the air force in the first place. I received an apology from the military police for any inconvenience caused me and I could breathe freely once more. But I would not like to live through a similar episode again.”

One of Laurie’s best wartime stories concerned Hitler’s chair. He never told the story in any of his books and, much later when he had practically come to the end of his writing career, he himself was unable to say why he had not done so since, he agreed, the tale was certainly worth passing on. “Perhaps I will include it when

I come to write my reminiscences,” he told me shortly before his death. But he did not have the time, and the tale of Hitler’s chair was recorded only in a few terse lines in his personal wartime diary.

At the end of the war an air force colleague of Laurie’s, a certain Captain X, arranged an airlift from the Middle East to Germany to spend his short leave seeing for himself the devastation caused by American and British bombing. While knocking about the ruins of the Third Reich he found himself at the bombed out shell of Hitler’s rambling retreat eyrie, Berchtesgarden, high up in the Bavarian Alps. A friendly American sentry permitted him to enter the once magnificent and heavily fortified place to look around. While exploring the crumbling and fire-blackened building the South African Air Force officer came across the Fuehrer’s council chamber almost undamaged – a vast, high-ceilinged room furnished with a long mahogany table surrounded by several wooden board-room type chairs. At the head of the table stood a handsomely carved straight-backed chair decorated at the top with a silver swastika emblem. This was obviously the chair used by Hitler at official meetings with his ministers, generals and advisers.

Captain X returned outside to the lolling sentry and offered him two bottles of French cognac to look the other way while the chair was removed. The sentry



willingly accepted the bribe and the air force officer flew back to Cairo with his coveted trophy. He was then faced with the problem of getting Hitler's chair to South Africa with no awkward questions asked when his demobilisation date fell due. This problem he shrewdly overcame by attaching to it a large, official-looking label reading: "Destination – South African War Museum, Pretoria. In the official Custody of Captain X," and boarding the military aircraft unchallenged with his loot on which he sat during the flight back to the Union.

Several years later Captain X decided to sell the chair. Once again he hit a snag. What proof had he for potential buyers that the chair had really been Hitler's? He took this teaser to Laurie who was once again at work on the "Cape Argus". Laurie consulted the newspaper's "Hitler File" and turned up a large colour picture from "Life" magazine. This showed Hitler actually sitting in the chair briefing his generals early in the war. The real and pictorial chairs matched in every detail. Here was indisputable evidence that Captain X's chair had once belonged to Adolf Hitler. Laurie presented his friend with the picture to authenticate his possession and was glad to hear later that Captain X had sold his chair to a satisfied buyer for £200.

Knowing Laurie's temperament it is strange to me that his rejection of regimentation, his resentment of intrusion upon his privacy and his trepidation at

involvement in the hollow irrelevancies of social life, which were so much part of his nature, did not fill him with more indignation over the manifestation of military routine and discipline than they did. But he found amusement, much of it cynical, yet nevertheless amusement, in the paradoxes and absurdities of army life and the military mind. He also hated all forms of organised sport as a sort of carry over of his dislike of organised social life. Rugby, cricket, soccer and bowls left him cold and he had not the slightest knowledge of the rules of any. To Laurie a loose rugby forward probably meant a footballer on a drinking spree in the red light district; bowling a maiden over in cricket might have denoted a girl pedestrian knocked down by a careless motorist. He never in his life saw the inside of the Newlands rugby ground, nor Lords, the Oval or the centre court at Wimbledon, although he had ample opportunity time and again to do so. He simply could not understand why grown-up people should wish to expend energy on childish ball games. And to Laurie all ball games were childishly inane and wastes of precious time. Once, in England, an old friend cajoled him into an afternoon at a Wembley soccer cup final. He had rarely been so bored, he told me later; he never discovered who was playing who, or why, and it was only the animal noises and raucous behaviour of the crowd that kept him interested and in his seat until the end.

He liked to recall the day in 1918 when he was training as a pilot at the Royal Flying Corps school in the South of England. At a parade an officious sergeant-major demanded to know from each cadet in what sport they wished to take part. One said soccer, another answered golf and so on. Then came Laurie's turn.

"Yachting!" he said firmly and succinctly. The sergeantmajor gaped in apoplectic amazement at this heresy and blew himself up like an enraged bullfrog.

"Yachting!" he barked unbelievably while Laurie's answer sunk in. "Yachting! Well then, Mr Bloody Green, I suggest you go for a long sail in your own bleedin' cap. Squad dismiss!" Laurie's answer had saved him from taking part in the organised sport he so heartily detested; the disgusted sergeant-major never raised the question of his participation in recreational games again.

Laurie's philosophy on what he called "promotion mania" during the Second World War was revealed in letters from him from the Middle East where, he said, he was quite content to see out hostilities as a humble lieutenant as long as the top brass did not bother him too much. "The dominating motive in our army appears to be the quest for promotion. Chaps I knew as second lieutenants in 1940 are already majors. To anyone with a sense of real values it is queer to reflect that the men who take the chief risks, the pilots, can seldom rise above the rank of lieutenant. But the base officers and men go about moaning loudly, studying the

seniority roll and crying out if they are superseded. A little judicious pile-biting often does the trick, however.

“I have almost reached the proud position of most senior lieutenant in the I.T. and A. branch of the South African Air Force; and I am sure that I owe this success to the fact that I have never competed for promotion. I have a poor opinion of my military ability, anyway, so there is at least one person here without a grievance. I shall have to deal with the promotion mania in a book I shall write after the war – it will affect all ranks equally and I shall have some funny stories to tell.”

Once when commenting somewhat unfavourably on the average army medical officer and his want of bedside tenderness, he wrote whimsically: “I shall also have a word to say about these gentry in the book I intend to write. Here in Cairo my mind goes right back to World War I when I was lying in a barracks bed with a high temperature and feeling near death in the grip of the great influenza epidemic of 1918. One of these ‘vets’ came into my room to examine me and remarked callously to his orderly as soon as he stepped inside: ‘Ha, sergeant, we seem to have come to a bloody girls’ school!’ Things don’t appear to have changed much since then. The army M.O.’s are just the same hard-hearted bastards in the Middle East as they were twenty-five years ago in the Royal Flying Corps.”

Much as he hated the “lunacy of war” and, as he put it, “the lunatics engaged in conducting it”, Laurie found the Middle East fascinating from a writer’s point of view. Cairo and Alexandria appealed enormously to his zest for uncovering the bizarre and ridiculous. Long years afterwards he still told in these words a tale about the party given by a Cairo millionaire which he attended.

“The Egyptian millionaire was in agony from toothache when I arrived at his houseboat and he gathered the impression that I was an army doctor. I played along and prescribed six aspirins and a glass of neat whisky without ice.

“My host appeared dubious. ‘Six aspirins all at once seem a hell of a lot. Are you sure, Doctor, that I can take so many without ill-effects?’

“Brimming with confidence owing to the brandy I had been drinking, I replied: ‘Oh yes, quite sure, we often prescribe as many as eight in severe cases’. He took the lot at a gulp and his toothache was cured in no time. A few minutes later his wife came along with a genuine medical major in tow who had had so much to drink that he could hardly walk.

“‘It’s quite all right now,’ the millionaire dismissed him with a flutter of a jewelled hand, ‘Dr Green here has already treated me.’ The British major studied me owlishly for a few seconds then mumbled, ‘Tell me, Doctor, have you been having any difficulty about dosages up here owing to the different weights and measures?’ ‘No, no,’ I replied quickly with perfect self-possession, ‘I just

stick to the good old pharmacopoeia and everything's fine.' The major nodded in drunken agreement and lurched off to find another drink.

“Shortly after this I went on deck to admire the Nile view by moonlight and was joined by a dark Egyptian beauty supercharged with sex appeal. She had been sent by the grateful millionaire as payment for my services.”

Although I asked him several times whether he had cashed this alluring cheque for medical services rendered, Laurie only grinned and politely changed the subject!

When at a later stage he became South African Air Force Press Officer in Cairo Laurie remarked joyfully in a letter: “My whole life has now changed. Travelling about the desert I have had my first real glimpse of war and found nothing I could not stand. I have often been more nervous in the Kalahari with a lot of meat hanging up and lions around. My incredible luck follows me, too, and it is always the neighbouring aerodrome that gets bombed, never exactly where I am lying on my camp stretcher listening to the noise but too lazy to get up and go into a slit trench.

“The dust storms are literally hell but I always have the comforting thought that I shall return to Cairo in due course and have a hot bath.

“Cairo can be much hotter than the desert – the sort of heat I once described in one of my books, the type of oppressive, sticky heat one never gets used to. And the atmosphere at the Continental-Savoy Hotel grows crazier night after night. A friend of mine was recently served a club sandwich which he disliked. To show his disapproval he threw it out of the window and he and his companions then broke up most of the furniture and threw that out as well. The manager never even complained!

“Crazy things happen here outside the army, too. Believe it or not a few days ago the great pyramid of Cheops caught fire and the fire brigade had to come to put out the blaze! Someone threw a burning cigarette away and the wooden scaffolding and steps inside caught alight.

“A gang of cat burglars has just been rounded up in Cairo – or should they be called ape burglars? Shades of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous story, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, this gang had trained monkeys to enter windows high up in buildings on thieving missions. What a country!”

Laurie considered himself lucky to be in Cairo instead of in Pretoria or Cape Town where he might have been stationed permanently throughout the war had he not played his cards correctly. “Everything passes through Cairo headquarters,” he wrote to me shortly after he had settled in. “Of course a squadron in the desert

would have been useful to me as a writer – I have had a glimpse of that life and it appeals to me greatly. But it is possible to study human reactions to the strain of war here in Cairo, too, and I am not giving away any secrets when I record that the temporary blokes stand up to it far better than the professionals.”

Though he humorously deprecated his military prowess he was, in fact, an efficient, methodical and understanding administrative officer with only a few lapses from the rigid regulations, and his loathing of war and the impersonal military machine never blinded him to the justice of the anti-Fascist cause. Before his transfer to the Middle East he was attached to an air station in Cape Town where the pointless routine and repetitive duty irked him beyond measure. Feeling he was making little contribution to the war effort he wangled his way nearer the front and despised those brother officers, some much younger than himself, who played with strings to remain in safe, comfortable jobs hundreds of miles from the battlefield. A SAAF meteorological officer who today manages a huge unit trust company still remembers Laurie’s kindness and refusal to “pull rank”. This officer was young and full of the irresponsible joys of life. Daily he had to make motor journeys all over the Cape Peninsula, visiting air stations and military depots, in the course of his subaltern tasks. But he often diverted from the official route against orders to visit a girl friend who lived in the suburbs. On the eve of his departure for the Western Desert he called on Laurie to complete a



military formality. Laurie, looking sternly forbidding, foraged in a drawer of his desk and displayed a thick batch of completed army forms: "Do you know what these are? They are all military police reports on your unauthorised detours in Defence Force cars. They could mean trouble for you and it is my duty to hand you over for appropriate punishment. But do you know what I am going to do with them? I'm tearing up the whole lot," and he dropped the torn shreds into his wastepaper basket.

The war ended and Laurie and I returned to the more relaxed, less disciplined claims of civilian life; I to take, mainly on Laurie's earnest advice, a professional degree to give me an advantage in the employment rat race; he to the editorial rooms of the "Cape Argus" he had left for the call of military service six years before. Both of us found it hard to re-adapt, Laurie far more so than I. Laurie came home from the Middle East oddly confused and unsettled. For a person of his sensitive imagination there had been too many vividly indelible experiences, too much tragedy, too many grotesque and turbulent characters for his contented peace of mind. And in Cairo there had been a woman, an enormously obese middle-aged creature, as ugly as sin, with influential army connections, whom he had befriended and whom he suspected of playing the dangerous game of double secret agent working for both sides. And she had penetrated deep beneath his skin. Who she really was and where she came from Laurie could never find out.

Since he assured my mother and me that he was not the slightest in love with this unimaginable *femme fatale*, in fact did not particularly like her as a person, it can only be surmised that it was her peculiar aura of mystery that impressed itself so firmly on his memory.

My mother worried over his unhappy preoccupation and did what she could to calm his troubled spirit by adopting an attitude of kind and consoling understanding. For weekend after weekend after his homecoming they walked the Blaauwberg beach together in serious conversation, Laurie unburdening himself of his uncertainties and fears, my mother nodding in silent sympathy and casting out his devils with her words of level-headed sagacity. To help the process of exorcism Laurie wrote his one and only novel. A romantic tale of peacetime Egypt, the fictional characters composite pen portraits of some of the strange, disorientated personalities he had come to know under the stresses of fast living, conspiracy and bloodshed, the telling of "At the Nile Hotel" was his farewell to the grave mental uneasiness that haunted him. The book written and the discordant thoughts erased entirely from his system, he was once again the delightful person we knew before he had responded to the strident call of war.

His hopes were high for this novel. "I am afraid that the Bushmen and camels have lost a friend," he said with unwarranted optimism when the manuscript was

completed, “and it will now be only a matter of time before they are setting up the yellow *facade* of Cairo’s Continental-Savoy Hotel in Hollywood ...” But his hopes did not reach fruition.

He showed the work to his old friend and journalist colleague, Scott Haigh. Scott, with the intuition of a trained writer and the honesty of a sincere friend, advised against publication. It did no justice to Laurie’s literary talents he concluded frankly. And Laurie, always heeding Scott’s judgment and advice, consigned the typed sheets to the bottom of an unused drawer.

Twenty-seven years later, after Laurie’s death, I found the 85 000 word manuscript while clearing out his flat and read it for the first time. I agreed entirely with Haigh’s unbiased verdict. “At the Nile Hotel” would have done nothing to advance Laurie’s reputation as a writer. As he had willed me all his books and private papers I had no pangs of conscience at tearing up the manuscript and throwing the pieces in the waste basket just as he had done with the wad of unfavourable military police reports on his young airman friend nearly three decades before.

## CHAPTER 4

### TRAVEL

*If you want to know a man, travel with him.*

Proverbs.

My visits with Laurie to overseas cities began in 1938, only a short while before Adolf Hitler took it upon himself to upset our future plans by setting Europe aflame, when Laurie was thirty-eight and I had just celebrated my seventeenth birthday, was coming to conquer my basic antipathy towards him and was beginning gradually to like, admire and accept him as a permanent and necessary member of my immediate family. There was to be a long break, twenty-six years to be exact, before he and I were together again in foreign lands and by then he and I had helped fight a war, I had graduated with university degrees in psychology and sociology, and Laurie had achieved eminence as a leading South African author, no longer had a job to consider and was now in a financial position to enjoy his trips abroad without worrying unduly about expense.

But in 1938 he was still an unwilling employee of the “Cape Argus”, getting by on a modest salary, writing hard in his spare time and saving what he could for an overseas voyage. My father had by this time settled in India and he wrote that he would like to see me again. Could I and my mother make some plan to visit him?

As it happened the India-Africa Line was advertising inexpensive three month round-trip excursions to Rangoon via Ceylon and India. This was the answer to my father's question; my mother and I could make a plan and did. Laurie, who could never be parted from my mother for any length of time if he could avoid it, suggested that he take leave from his newspaper and join us on the cruise. My mother, never wanting to be away from Laurie for long, was overjoyed at his decision. But could he afford the ninety-five pounds inclusive fare? Laurie calculated that he could and hastened to the shipping office to book an extra berth.

It was during our time together aboard the tiny m.v. *Incomati* that he and I really grew to know and understand each other. Whereas formerly there had been the hurdle of reticence between us, the restricting barrier of vague fear of each in some way offending the sensitivities of the other, the shy, careful feeling of our ways in an ill-defined, somewhat irregular and slightly embarrassing semi-domestic situation, the long passage to India and our excursions ashore at strange, enchanting ports swiftly eroded all such superficial obstacles and drew us closer together. Our relationship moved into a new, more relaxed and emotionally spontaneous phase of mutual liking and trust which was to endure from that time on.

Urgent business commitments necessitated my father travelling inland to New Delhi and he was unavailable when our ship finally reached Calcutta. I did not see him at all. My disappointment should have been acute. It wasn't. After all, had I not just acquired in softly-spoken 'Uncle' Laurie a brand-new father-figure whom I could respect and admire and for which my heart had yearned for eleven formative years? – a father-substitute I had grown to love, honour and, above all, one in which I knew I could place my faith implicitly.

Together he, my mother and I investigated the alleys and bazaars, the temples and mosques, the best restaurants and bathing places in Zanzibar, Mombasa, Colombo, Madras and Calcutta. And Laurie was a knowledge-able and kindly guide and host. At Beira a high-class prostitute joined the ship, a plump blonde woman in the late forties who was destined for Rangoon. Although addicted to alcohol she was intelligent, well-spoken, elegantly dressed and possessed a quick sense of bubbling humour. Laurie liked talking to her and was often to be found making mental notes of her conversation while entertaining her to evening drinks at the aft deck verandah bar. She was, she told him unashamedly, a woman of education who had come down in the world and had turned to her particular way of life after the death of her husband. She travelled the world plying her trade at the best hotels of the cities she stopped off at and, she assured Laurie, she had been making a substantial living in this manner for a number of years. "I'm

known to my clients as ‘Cuddles’ and my rate is twelve pounds a time. But I am good and they tell me I’m well worth every penny,” she told Laurie by way of hopeful advertisement.

At Rangoon Laurie stood with me at the ship’s rail and we watched the few disembarking passengers shepherding their baggage towards the customs shed. “There is a winning short story there. I knew it after talking to her for only a few minutes,” Laurie pointed down the gangway at the departing curvacious figure of “Cuddles” who had told us her intention of setting up business for a while at the Grand Hotel. “But unfortunately it has already been written by Somerset Maugham,” he added regretfully. “That woman is Sadie Thompson to the life. Somewhere, sometime, Maugham must have met someone just like her on a voyage like this and was inspired to write his classic, ‘Rain’.”

Laurie disliked India and Burma and disclosed afterwards that although he enjoyed being with my mother and me he would never consider another trip East again. “It was an interesting experience as all trips abroad are, but Europe takes a lot of beating,” was his opinion. “Europe has far more to offer without the dirt and squalor and the uncomfortable climate, all of which I found extremely hard to take. Having seen the East I am now content to concentrate on the cities of the Continent during my future travels.” This Eastern sojourn, I am sure, prompted

him in the formulation of his oft propounded and not illogical theory that travellers tend to like and speak well of the places in which they felt absolutely fit and healthy at the time of their visits, and are luke-warm or sneeringly derogatory about cities, towns and countries where they have perhaps been a point or two under perfect physical nick.

In India he suffered badly from the heat. Although he always wore a sola topi to protect his bald head from the sun and dressed in shorts and light-weight suits, he was usually prostrate semi-naked on his bed under a fan in the afternoons trying to keep cool, emerging only late after a shower in the evening for iced drinks under a whirling *punkah* and a leisurely dinner in the air-conditioned diningroom of a good hotel or restaurant. The Eastern heat curtailed his activities and there was nothing more frustrating to him than being hotel-bound when in a strange city crying out to be explored.

The teeming masses of Calcutta and Rangoon disturbed him. Never had he seen such dirt and dreadful poverty, so many whining beggars, many of them blind and deliberately maimed children. He was appalled when leaving first-class restaurants or hotels at which he had dined well he was forced to step over dozens of homeless people sleeping on the pavement, to reach his taxi.

To get away from the offensive sights and atmosphere of Calcutta he took a trip





To escape the heat of Calcutta, Laurie went up to Darjeeling to see for a few seconds the rays of the rising sun strike the snow-capped tip of Everest.

to Darjeeling to rise at dawn and see for a few seconds the flash of the rising sun on the snow-capped peak of far-off Everest across the border in Tibet. But the heat in the train exhausted him and he could not be prevailed upon to make the trip to Agra to enjoy the wonders of the Taj Mahal. His most amusing experience was a call at the Calcutta cinema studio, Tollywood, where he was given V.L.P. treatment while gathering material for an article he intended writing for "Men Only". He was asked whether he would like to meet one of India's most famous film stars. The glamorous Hindu movie queen was ushered before him, bowed low and stood, eyes downcast, waiting in silence to be addressed. At the end of the interview, during which she politely answered Laurie's questions, the director tapped Laurie on the shoulder. "May she go now, Mr Green?" Laurie nodded, the film queen of India touched the red spot on her forehead in respectful salutation and moved away backwards from his presence, salaaming as she went. "Can you imagine this happening to me in Hollywood?", he laughed at the episode later. "Just think of someone like Greta Garbo or Mary Pickford walking backwards and bowing in obeisance after I had dismissed her with a snap of the fingers. It would just be too damn good to be true."

It was on the quayside at Calcutta that Laurie one day came to view me with new and unusual regard. At the bottom of the gangway a turbaned vendor was selling stuffed mongeese and cobras mounted in realistic fighting attitudes, the hooded

cobras poised to strike, tightly coiled around the mongeese, the blood-stained mongeese snarling in bare-fanged retaliation. Laurie, set on acquiring one of these handsome items, was quoted an exorbitant price by the vendor. Before he could get the money from his pocket I took it into my head to bet him I could beat down the seller if he returned to the ship and left me to my haggling. A few minutes later I knocked on Laurie's cabin door and proudly presented him with the fine specimen of mortal combat I had obtained for less than half the number of rupees he had been prepared to pay.

Laurie never forgot this, to him, hitherto unknown bargaining aptitude on my part, and from then on during the trip I always made his purchases for him while he hovered discreetly in the background. Many years later he was still informing others of my shrewd business acumen and would recount in glowing detail just how I had got him his unusual Eastern memento and saved him money to boot.

While it was true that he did not regret his trip to the East (no journey anywhere was ever a waste of time to Laurie) it was to Europe to which he returned again and again after the war right up to the time of his death. He would have liked to have settled there, in a villa in the South of France or somewhere on the east coast of Spain, and in later years he could well have afforded to do so. But Laurie, for all his solitariness, was very much a creature of habit, deploring major change of

any sort he could not face the prospect of life without his few close friends. “I would clear off tomorrow and live in France or Spain,” he often confided his desire for a Continental life, “if only I could have all my friends with me. If I was a very rich man I would, without any hesitation at all, buy a fine villa in Nice, Cannes or somewhere on the Costa Brava and transport all my friends to live with me in luxury under the warm Mediterranean sun.” And he sincerely meant what he said.

During the 1950’s and ‘60’s, when Laurie, always strongly socialistically inclined, worried that the South African Nationalist Government was leading the country to financial chaos and bloody racial strife, he spoke seriously of settling abroad and frequently suggested that my mother and I make plans to join him in a Cote d’Azur or Spanish villa before it was too late to getaway and we had lost all our possessions and perhaps our lives as well. In the face of stringent government legislation he had for some years been secreting certain assets and money in English banks – his escape hatch, as he termed it – on which he could draw should he be forced by political change to leave South Africa for good. My mother, however, was reluctant to take such a drastic step in middle-age and all his engaging plans for a communal life in a well-appointed, fully-staffed French Riviera villa came to naught. The best he could do was content himself with yearly two-month trips to England and coach tours of the Continent. But he was

never to cease worrying about the future of the country, and engaged himself in torturous means of insuring against the financial and racial cataclysm he convinced himself was inevitable and not far off. He considered buying rare postage stamps, easily transportable, which would at any time realise their value in any country in the world. He consulted experts on the possibility of purchasing valuable diamonds which could be hidden on his person when leaving South Africa, and bought up a quantity of gold sovereigns with the certainty that as the value of paper money decreased gold would shoot up in worth.

Laurie was never reconciled to the National Government. He disliked its, to him, high-handed totalitarian form of administration, deplored the party's anti-Second World War record and always voted Progressive when such a candidate was up for election. "I have never been on the winning side politically in my life," he lamented. "On polling day I cast my vote with a sinking heart, knowing beforehand that the candidate I vote for will never make it. But I really hate all politicians – they are a hungry lot and most of them are only in the game for themselves, only a handful really care anything at all for their constituents."

Later when he had become famous and an expert on South West Africa he received a feeler from a Nationalist M.P. to produce a propaganda brochure on the territory for circulation overseas. A substantial fee was mentioned but he

turned down the offer with the cool dismissal: “Nothing would get me to work for or accept money from the Nationalists. I dislike them heartily and will do so until my dying day. I will do nothing to help them.” He fulfilled these sentiments to the letter to the end of his life.

Nor was he a Smuts or United Party man. An old friend of Laurie’s father, the general was at one time a frequent visitor at Laurie’s parents’ home (Smuts once asked Laurie’s father where his son obtained all the information for his books and was told laconically, “Oh, he just talks to people and remembers what they say”), but although Laurie admired Smuts’ physical fitness and his interest in and knowledge of botany and nature and conceded that he had a brain out of the ordinary, he considered the famous South African statesman too shrewd and coldly calculating for his own good. “He was not a very human type of man, not very lovable,” Laurie dissected Smuts’ character, “and he had the fatal weakness of personal vanity which led to his eventual political downfall and which, in my opinion, excluded him from the ranks of really great men.”

After the war Laurie came to hold strong anti-Fascist views. As a result, while he liked the country and had nothing but praise for its people, he was never completely at home in Franco’s Spain, a country which he came to know fairly well over the years and which he described sadly as pathetically poor, incredibly

backward and hideously priest-ridden. Once while being conducted over a monastery outside Madrid, the tour guide asked him to place his ear to the panel of a door behind which Trappist monks were repetitively intoning. The guide explained that the monks were chanting: “We are going to die, and we know it” over and over again.

“And what,” asked practical Laurie, “do they do except chant?”

“Nothing,” replied the guide, “that is all they do all day – it is their only vocation in life.”

“This is just the sort of wasteful nonsense that has put people off organised religion,” Laurie told me disgustedly, “this and the tawdry imagery found in places of worship in Latin countries. How can a country hope to progress when this unenlightened attitude is sanctioned and encouraged?” While admitting that there was possibly a superior force determining life and nature, Laurie could never make up his mind whether such a Deity was necessarily benign, loving and charitable, and he was not religious in the ordinary sense of the word. There was, he maintained, too much of the hand of man and not enough of the hand of God in organised, orthodox religion. But he was no agnostic. “Those who deny the existence of God show only their extreme conceit,” he said. “No one can possibly know whether God exists or not, there is no proof one way or another, our minds

are not sufficiently developed to cope with the problem. Try to think of infinity for long enough and you will go mad – you see what I mean? It is the same with eternity and the hereafter. No, I am afraid that man has fabricated convenient answers to the religious questions he is unable to understand but wishes to answer, and the trappings of the clergy have assumed ridiculous importance as aids to wishful theological thinking and the control of the masses.”

Apart from the Spanish form of Roman Catholicism and Fascism which made him despair at superstition and the credulousness of human nature, he picked Barcelona as the third place in the world he would like to live if given the choice. His first was Cape Town. Second came Nice on the French Riviera. He was unable to say why this was since he abominated the strict religious atmosphere, was bitterly against the ruling regime and thought Spanish food and wine among the worst in Europe. But he returned to Spain again and again, spent long hours at the natural history museums and art galleries, thoroughly explored the country by coach and attended bullfights whenever he was in the neighbourhood of a *corrida* festival.

He considered bull-fighting an archaic and brutal form of entertainment which often revolted him and made him promise himself never to visit an arena again after witnessing a particularly gory exhibition. But he enjoyed the massed



*aficionados*' reactions, loved the colour and spectacle and equated the footwork of the matadors with those of a Russian *corps de ballet*, and time and again he would find himself, against his will, pushing his way through the noisy audience lusting for the slaughter to his narrow cement seat high up in the shade, while making the placating mental justification that by merely staying away he would not cause Spanish bull-fights to cease. "A writer should see everything he can that is going on in the world, even though he disapproves of what he witnesses," was his maxim. "Knowing all is understanding all. There are many things one does not like in the world, but individual disapproval will not necessarily change these; they are *there* whether one accepts them or not. They are all part of life and a writer's function is to record life as it is and to make full use of all experiences and information at his disposal."

On one of his coach trips through Spain Laurie obtained a glimpse of Continental life which would probably have washed over most travellers without a sense of humour and sensitivity for funny situations. The coach stopped at a country inn and he set off to locate the lavatory. While he was standing up against the urinal a woman entered with a small boy whom she unconcernedly proceeded to "water" alongside him. Laurie, naturally embarrassed at such an unexpected intrusion, hastily buttoned himself up and left in red-faced confusion. The coach courier, who had been washing his hands at a corner basin, hurried after him down the

passage calling loudly in a reassuring voice, “Come back and finish, Mr Green. There is nothing to worry about, the lady is married!”

“Such uninhibitedness could only be found on the Continent,” Laurie chuckled when he told me this incident, “it was a refreshing slant on the realistic Latin mentality.”

This anecdote has certain significance. Laurie, who thought Chic Sales’ “The Specialist” the best treatise he had ever read on the subject, always had a strange fascination for lavatories and made a detailed study of them in all parts of the world, observing innovations or unusual features for inclusion in his books. My mother deplored this, to her, unedifying latrine interest, frequently accused him of having a particularly immature and schoolboyish lavatory-orientated sense of humour, and was utterly incapable of laughing at his humorous stories all too frequently larded with undue emphasis on this aspect of basic bodily function. I do not wish to give the impression that Laurie was crude. In the ordinary sense he was neither crude nor coarse. But lavatories somehow appealed to his sense of fun and a good lavatory description or joke would always find an appreciative audience in Laurie.

He knew all the restaurant and hotel lavatories in his neighbourhood from first-hand experience and he was well qualified to deliver an amusing discourse on the

comfort, state of cleanliness and overall ambience of each, which he nearly always did as a prelude to ordering from the menu. The most attractive public lavatory he had come across in Cape Town, Laurie said, was attached to a small Italian Sea Point restaurant near his flat – the atmosphere was of the right soothing quality, the place was excellently appointed and was a joy to use – and I often suspected that this was the reason for him patronising this particular bistro, since he could say little complimentary about the food or service obtained there.

Laurie was often able to combine his “fixation” for lavatories with another of his life-long interests-the study of trains and horse-drawn carriages. He could truthfully say that during his time he had made a point of travelling on all the world’s famous trains and was an expert on the comparative merits of all the best known wagons-lits and dining-cars. Somewhat reluctantly, I thought, for Laurie sometimes held the imaginary view that things were generally better done overseas, he had to admit that South Africa’s luxury Blue Train linking Cape Town with Johannesburg took some beating.

I once saw him off from Paris to Nice on France’s crack, streamlined ‘Mistral’. He was looking forward to the quick, restful journey across the breadth of France and eagerly anticipated the first-class cuisine and wine he was certain to be served in the luxuriously fitted dining saloon. Several days later I met him in

Cannes and asked about the journey. “The train is not all it is made out to be, I’m sad to say,” the vaunted standards of the famous Riviera special had not come up to scratch. “But the trip was not entirely unrewarding. I discovered in my compartment a most unusual type of chamberpot. This utensil had a handle and a peculiar sort of snout affair at the other end. After use the contraption is replaced in its holding bracket and the speed of the train empties it completely through the spout as if by magic.” It was undoubtedly the snouted jerry that had impressed Laurie most about the celebrated French flier.

There was no railway or coach museum in the world that Laurie had not explored with maximum zeal and interest. He and I made several expeditions to the North London railway exhibit and the old Italian coach collection housed in the Rome Termini station, with Laurie excitedly pointing out and explaining the ingenious toilet facilities laid on for the convenience of early-day travellers. And he made me promise to visit the famous Lisbon coach museum (which I never had the opportunity of doing) which, he reminded me, featured the most comprehensive carriage collection of all.

“And whatever you do, don’t forget to examine the king of Portugal’s long-distance coach”, he laid particular stress on this old vehicle. “The velvet top of the seat lifts off showing a large bucket suspended underneath for use by the king

and queen should they be taken short between post stops. A most delightful lavatory arrangement, and one well worth visiting Lisbon specially to see.”

It was a pity that fine art did not stir his imagination to the extent that carriages, trains and lavatories did. His limited artistic knowledge and taste in pictures was biased entirely in favour of the old Dutch and Flemish type of graphic depiction. Although he professed a liking for the works of the impressionists, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Utrillo, it was the art of Rembrandt, particularly “The Night Watch”, over which he was enraptured. When in Amsterdam he paid several visits to the Rijk’s Museum to stand in silent reverie for minutes on end before the huge Rembrandt masterpiece, but could not be prevailed upon to spend more than the shortest time at any of the galleries exhibiting more modern and progressive types of art.

At one time, when Laurie was rapidly ascending the slopes of literary stature and was beginning to make a household name for himself as an author, he fondly imagined for a few ecstatic minutes that he was to be the possessor of a valuable work of art, a Gainsborough, a Reynolds or at least a Matisse or a small Picasso, for nothing. A multi-millionaire industrialist attempting to woo him away from his book-writing with the bait of the position of public relations director in his worldwide organisation at a temptingly high salary, invited him to lunch.

Although not particularly interested in the proposition, he went along to the tycoon's mansion to hear what he had to say.

After lunch his wealthy host took him to his upstairs picture gallery to admire his priceless collection of Turner's, Cezanne's, Gauguin's and Monet's. Laurie, apparently, showed the necessary enthusiasm and made all the right observations and comments. When they had examined the last Old Master the millionaire surprised Laurie by saying, "I can tell that you know something about painting and appreciate great art. I have one or two canvases to spare. Would you like a picture, Mr Green?"

Laurie, overcome with gratitude, answered that indeed he would and thanked his host profusely for his generosity. The millionaire vanished into another room leaving Laurie cogitating exultantly as to where in his tiny flat the gift of a Rubens or a Claude blonet would show to best advantage.

The millionaire returned a few seconds later with a framed picture which he handed over saying, "You may have this one. Take care of it and hang it where the light is good. I painted it myself a year or so ago but I have no room to put it up here!"

The picture? An amateurish daub of purple cows in reddish pasture which a young child could have painted better and which Laurie ripped from its frame and

hurled disgustedly into his garbage bin as soon as he got home.

But art galleries generally bored him and on the occasions we were together in Paris, Rome and London, our expeditions to the Louvre and other famous art collections were invariably halted by him becoming restless and wanting to leave after only a cursory look at the more banal and well-known works of art. Later, when he visited Spain for the first time, he fell in love with the canvases of Goya and El Greco. "What faces!" he wrote to me from Toledo, "the faces of true and utter suffering. El Greco not only captured the great underlying sadness of man, he painted his very soul crying out against the many injustices of life." And he discovered other Spanish art treasures he had overlooked, "Valazquez's 'Las Meninas' is possibly the greatest picture ever painted besides 'The Night Watch'," he told me after his first stay in Madrid and his many hours at the Prado. "The Prado is surely the finest art gallery in the world; to my mind it knocks the Louvre, the National Gallery and the Royal Academy into a cocked hat."

Not everyone would agree with this debatable statement, but Laurie had no pretensions to anything more than a superficial understanding of art and he was the first to admit that during a long life-time of travel and exploration he had never been sufficiently artistically and technically minded to master the use of

the camera to his satisfaction. Although he studied the subject in great detail (as he always studied all aspects of the things he wished to know about) and spent a good deal of money on expensive camera – he favoured the Rolleiflex – and photographic equipment, the pictures he took as illustrations for his books and magazine articles nearly always fell far short of what he wanted and he was candid in saying that, although he had tried hard to master the medium, he had not even reached the status of advanced amateur. And he was right. Well versed in photographic theory and with an “eye” for what a picture should be he had little talent for actually putting his theoretical knowledge into gear when, camera in hand, he was faced with a scene he wanted to record on film.

During the war Laurie met Cecil Beaton in the Western Desert. Beaton, a true wizard with the instrument, could take better pictures with a simple box camera than most of his fellow official war photographers could capture with the most elaborate and costly apparatus. “Once,” said Laurie, “Beaton returned from an assignment in the fighting zone with a magnificent picture of an old discarded army boot lying half-covered by drifting sand in the desert. This picture, absolutely perfect as regards light and shadow, texture and composition, caught the whole atmosphere of the Middle East campaign to a far greater extent than the action pictures of tanks, advancing infantry, refugees and artillery barrages brought back by his professional colleagues. It is some indefinable artistic



quality about Beaton's work which set him head and shoulders above other photographers and makes him the outstanding photographic artist he is."

Laurie took one or two hurried lessons from Beaton but was never able to produce anything but slightly above average pictures, most of which, to his acute disappointment, were technically and artistically unsuitable for illustration publication.

Apart from the times in his earlier days when he ventured out into the blue in search of material for his writing, he was against travelling with a camera. This item of equipment he considered entirely unnecessary on ordinary travels and a camera was never to be found in his luggage during his trips to the Capitals of Europe and South America. "If one wants a picture of anything overseas it can easily be obtained on a picture post-card for a few pence," he replied to photographic enthusiasts surprised that his trips abroad were always cameraless, and his views on camera-festooned tourists "wasting time and miles of film by snapping away at monuments and buildings that have already been photographed thousands of times before by other camera lunatics," were often bitingly sarcastic and rude.

Nothing upset him more than when examining a famous statue or other work of art a camera pest approached to ask him to move out of the way so that the object

could be photographed. Such a request usually had the exact opposite effect, as I witnessed on several occasions when we were together in art galleries and museums in Rome, London and Paris. When this sort of interruption occurred Laurie, his rounded chin stuck out in obstinate defiance, blue eyes flashing annoyance, resolutely stood his ground before the object of his attention and muttered from the corner of his mouth the direct instruction to me that the brash interrupter could easily overhear: “Tell this idiot to bugger of, *tout suite*.”

Apart from this I rarely heard him use bad language. Such words and exacerbations were not part of his usual vocabulary and, a normally mildly spoken individual, he would have to be profoundly irritated or greatly provoked to resort to expletives of any kind, and never once did I hear him blaspheme, even under extreme pressure.

It was I who had the pleasure of introducing him to Nice in 1963. I had visited the Côte d’Azur twice after the war to try my luck at the roulette tables at Cannes, Nice and Monte Carlo, to call on Somerset Maugham by invitation at his Villa Mauresque at Cap Ferrat, and to acquire a Mediterranean suntan on the narrow beaches strung along the fabulous coast from Saint-Tropez to Menton like pearls in an exotic and expensive necklace. In all his travels Laurie had never seen the French Riviera, and my rhapsodical descriptions of my stays along the legendary

coast were instrumental in getting him to correct his omission. I wired him in London where he was researching for his next book to join me for a short while in Nice. He was there three days later, immediately fell in love with the atmosphere, climate and unhurried way of life and from then on always contrived to include a visit to the Côte d'Azur where he engaged a room and bath at the plush Plaza Hotel overlooking the Nice public gardens and the sea whenever his overseas timetable permitted.

He and I roamed the Riviera resorts at leisure, sampling the food and wine at *bistros* and bars, pottering about the busy yacht harbours and swimming from the Negresco, Ruhl and Florida *plages* every afternoon after tea. Laurie was gay and energetic; the sophisticated seaside Continental life suited him in all respects. On Nice's Rue Messena we came across an inexpensive one-star restaurant serving plates of snails sizzling aromatically in garlic sauce and claiming that it never closed, day or night. This became our favourite Riviera restaurant and at later times when he visited Nice on his own each of his letters from the Côte d'Azur contained some commendatory reference to the Cave Nicôise: "...last night a first-class meal of fried snails, tender grilled fillet steak with a pile of sauté mushrooms and a good bottle of fine red wine of the house, topped off with Danish blue and coffee at the Cave. The food here suits my querulous digestion. If only such a place existed in Cape Town all my dining problems would be solv-

ed..."

And he loved his late afternoon swims in the milk-warm Mediterranean. But walking down the Promenade Des Anglais with Laurie from our Hotel Suisse on the Quai Des Etats-Unis to the beach of our afternoon choice, always proved something of an embarrassment. For reasons best known to himself, he lavoured an ankle-length white towelling dressing-gown over his bathing trunks for our slow strolls down the crowded promenade. This, together with his brown leather sandals, bald, close-cropped head glinting in the dwindling sunshine and long-legged gait gave him the appearance of a tall Buddhist monk on an alms collecting expedition. Looking totally out of place among the bikinis, abbreviated trunks, shorts, trouser suits and latest fashions of the French Riviera, he seemed never to notice the stares, nudges, grins and turned heads which lollowed his stately progress and which were unusual on the permissive Côte d'Azur where inhabitants and holidaymakers are fully conditioned to a wide range of sartorial eccentricities and outlandish behaviour.

Although Laurie detested gambling and I was never to get him to share my enslavement to the green baize and clicking white balls of the Riviera casinos, he was fascinated by the refined restaurants, well-stocked bars and strident cabarets which are a feature of these gambling establishments. Sceptical of all supposedly

fool-proof roulette systems, I received little initial support from him the night I induced him, against his inclination, to follow my betting moves with his own money at the Palace de la Mediterranée where I tried out a new system of my own devising. Protestingly he allowed me to buy him a hundred francs worth of gambling chips; with an air of hopeless diffidence he took his seat beside me at the table to copy my systemised wagers from his own pile of plastic gambling discs. After three spins of the wheel he and I were both up 40 francs; another three and we had each made 95, and he looked at me and my simple mathematical roulette system with new respect and was taking a more lively interest in the proceedings. Another two spins and my system had run its course. I advised him to retire with his winnings before the tide turned on our good fortune. But he had been truly bitten by the roulette bug (sheer human greed, was his way of putting it later) and continued to play against my advice after I had prudently pocketed my profit of 115 francs and headed for the long bar to give a couple back.

I would love to say that the story had a happy ending, that Laurie, lured on by beginner's luck, left the table having won a fortune. But he lost the lot, including his original stake, and never again while on the Riviera took the slightest interest in its gambling attractions or could be inveigled into accompanying me on further visits to casinos. After this, whenever I informed him I intended putting in an

hour or so at the roulette tables, he shook his head in silent incredulity and immediately made arrangements to take a bus tour into the countryside or find his enjoyment at a leading restaurant while I was engaged with my stupidity. Casinos, according to Laurie, were a tedious experience and a gross waste of time. He could not understand how anyone of intellect could derive the slightest pleasure from watching a small white ball rattling around a spinning wheel. Studying the strained, intent expressions of those gathered around the roulette, bacarrat and boule tables with long sheets of “system” paper in their hands only convinced him that the French, although a highly civilised and progressive people in so many ways, probably had a higher rate of imbecility than any other nation since, as every intelligent person must know, the only certain way of winning in such places was to own the casino.

A few days later my mother joined us from Rome. Our six days together on the fabulous Côte d’Azur, Laurie told me shortly before our departure, were among the happiest of his travels. Never had I seen him quite so relaxed, so completely contented, in such good humour. My mother’s arrival undoubtedly had much to do with his upsurge of spirits, and his almost childlike delight in showing her the out of the way places he and I had already discovered underlined the deep affection and regard he had for his lifelong companion.

Our last night in Nice was spent happily in a smoky, secondrate striptease nightclub on the Rue de la Buffa which featured “The Most Voluptuous Nudes in Europe” and a troupe of trained orang-outangs on roller skates. Laurie was leaving for a cruise to Gibraltar and Morocco early next morning; my mother and I were to catch the Paris-bound plane a few hours later. We had dined and wined extraordinarily well at threestar Raynaud’s on the Quai Des Etats-Unis where, to mark the end of our pleasant time together in the millionaire’s playground, I expansively ordered a magnum of *Veuve Cliquot* which Laurie and I drained to the dregs. Our drinking then continued all through the palsied cabaret turns until well into the early hours.

Laurie was in excellent form, making spirited, humorous comments at the dreary efforts of the jaded performers who were so obviously throw-outs from higher-class Paris cabaret entertainments. When my scandalised mother pointed out that a tired-looking striptease dancer had discarded every stitch of clothing, including her meagre G-string, and was prancing about the stage entirely in the raw, Laurie laughed uproariously at her shock and counselled her in a carrying voice well lubricated with uncountable glasses of vintage champagne and the best French cognac, “Good heavens, dear, this doesn’t happen to be one of those awful Cape Town Temperance Union meetings, you know,” and, quite out of character, banged on the table and called loudly for an encore, in which I wholeheartedly joined. It was all too apparent

that he and I had had far too much to drink.

We left the night-club after the last weary fan-dancer had completed her stereotype of pathetic semi-erotic poses and ambled slowly and unsteadily through the deserted back streets of Nice at 3 a.m. to our hotel and the dismal job of last minute packing. Laurie had only five hours in which to board his ship. My mother and I were due at the Nice airport two hours later. Although in exuberant spirits, we were deep down all a little sad at winding up our last night together on the Côte d'Azur.

On the corner of the Avenue Verdun and the Place Messena Laurie threw all pent-up inhibitions to the wind by clinging incongruously for support to a lamp post outside the well-lit Municipal Casino and doubling up with an explosive guffaw. In stentorian voice he addressed us and the few people still about the square with an oration of ample testimony as to the good time he had been having and the quantity of liquor he had drunk. "You know what's wrong with me, my friends?" South Africa's best-selling author posed the rhetorical question which echoed up and down the near-empty square, "I'm pissed! Yes, for the first time in over twenty years, I am well and truly pissed!" And he certainly was!

That afternoon he went down with a mighty attack of stomach trouble on board the boat. This completely ruined his cruise. For most of the time the ship was at Gibraltar and Moroccan ports he was confined to bed with violently recurring



abdominal cramps and an unending spate of diarrhoea under the casual care of un pitying French doctors who diagnosed acute food poisoning aggravated by vulgar over-indulgence in alcohol and looked upon his illness as the result of his own shortsighted folly.

Assuring his success as an author with his first few published books and having retired early from his job on the “Cape Argus” in 1954 to devote all his time to writing, Laurie travelled to London and the Continent during the Cape winter for two months every year, with a cruise to South America and a brief one direct to Venice and Trieste in between, until his final illness laid him low. A lover of ship-board life, he made a point of trying the ships of most well known shipping lines (and some not so familiar) and after the war I seemed forever to be seeing him off and meeting him on arrival on liners flying the national flags of the world-French, Portuguese, Italian and British. Some he liked, others fell below expectation and he would not consider sailing on these ships again.

But it was the Union Castle Line plying between Cape Town and Southampton with which he could find no fault and he shortly settled down to regular bookings on the sleek, violethulled, orange funnelled mailships of the Company which gave him the best service and value for money. The prospect of his annual voyages in first-class cabin and private bath accommodation on the Windsor Castle – one of

the finest, most comfortable ships afloat, he opinioned – gave him much to look forward to. As sailing days approached, a lightening of his spirits was clearly noticeable as he anticipated, always with pleased animation, the excellent food, superb wines and faultless service he knew would come his way.

Those ignorant of Laurie's writing and research methods often wondered how he filled in his time during his longish stays alone in London. The answer is simple. His solitary weeks were by no means entirely pleasure-filled; he made his annual pilgrimage to London with the primary intention of working. And work he certainly did, with a little entertainment and good dining on the side after his long literary labours with pen, notebooks and small pocket tape recorder. And he always managed to complete two or three book chapters during the ship run to and from Southampton.

“Without my membership to the British Museum library, I would not have been capable of writing half the books I have,” Laurie had only praise for the huge grey structure and its staff in Great Russell Street. “Here I can lay my hands on anything I want within a matter of minutes, old manuscripts, documents, books, newspapers and magazines. The library is invaluable for the vast amount of research I must conduct to get hold of the buried information I require for my work. There seems to be nothing that can't be obtained upon request.

“I once asked the chief librarian for all the information he could let me have on the public library hall itself, as I wished to put this in a book chapter. In no time at all an assistant placed several fat volumes of data before me on my desk. These contained everything ever written about the very room I was sitting in! Now you know why I have to travel to England at least once a year; nowhere else in the world would I have such ready access to the facts I need if I am to continue writing. And don’t forget, the cost of my trips are written off legitimately to income tax.”

Laurie’s London work schedule was strict and inflexible. Little could upset the Monday to Friday research and notemaking course he set himself. From 8.30 a.m. until 1.00 p.m. and not a minute before or after, his London mornings were without fail devoted to earnest research at the famous British Museum library where, seated at his manuscript book and newspaper cluttered desk in the huge, high-domed chamber, he set to work laboriously and skilfully tracing and extricating the hidden material necessary for the book he planned or was currently writing. After this he put all thoughts of work out of his mind until next morning and enjoyed the pleasures London had to offer.

These were, to Laurie, of great and catholic variety – boat trips down the Thames to Greenwich; visits to Kew Gardens and to the London Zoo via the canals of

“Little Venice” from Paddington Station, where the antics of the chimpanzee’s tea party in the children’s section never failed to delight him; leisurely window-shopping up and down both sides of Piccadilly and Bond Street and regular nightly attendances in the best theatre, ballet, opera and concert hall seats he could obtain from the Keith Prowse Agency. Of all the many cities he grew to know so well in a lifetime of globe-trotting he was most at home in London. Although there were towns and countries he preferred to others, there was, as far as he was concerned, no place on earth, be it a large and bustling metropolis or an uninhabited wasteland way out in the blue, that was completely devoid of interest, and he had little patience with those who returned home with a list of complaints or dreary tales of unfortunate experiences which had irked them abroad.

These people, of which there seemed far too many for his liking, only showed themselves up as being of limited outlook and having distressingly restricted mental resources, and should be discouraged from travelling as their intellects were not geared to anything more exciting and adventurous than the most mundane and usual of happenings, Laurie said.

It was strange that Laurie, a compulsive and habitual traveller all his life, should have held the view that travel was actually a curse to mankind. He and I had many friendly discussions over this controversial aspect of travel philosophy, but

he always stood his ground maintaining that travel only disrupted contentment, encouraged the questioning of old values and dictums which gave a measure of serenity of mind, and generally had an unsettling effect which caused basic unhappiness. "Most of us would be far happier and contented if we just stayed put where we are," was the pillar of his argument. Listening to the woes of those who come home with grievances about what should really be the joys of getting about has convinced me that travel is wasted on the majority of people who would be far happier and contented if they stayed at home.

"Most people I have found, suffer from a sickening poverty of ideas and lack of appreciation for what they see or do, and find it a major undertaking to adjust to new surroundings and ways of life even for comparatively short periods. They are happier and more at ease in situations they can understand and to which they have become familiar. Travel away from a well-known environment and routine only disturbs the status quo and the process of readjustment to strange stimuli is for most of us most difficult if not practically impossible. No, those who have never felt the urgent call of a steamship siren or train whistle and nagging lure of strange lands are far happier than those who have."

When I suggested that travel must have a great broadening influence, especially on the young, and was surely justified on this account, Laurie always countered

with the question, “Is it necessary to broaden the mind when one is quite content to stay at home and get on with the job of living? After all, contentment of the spirit is surely the most important part of the art of happy existence,” and would never affirm that travel was at all important for the psychological gratification of the average individual.

His preparation for any trip, be it to the bright lights of Europe and the Americas, some lonely, hard-to-get-to island or shrieking, uninhabited wilderness, was always exhaustively thorough. “Before I go anywhere in the world I read up all I can about the places I’m to visit and make comprehensive notes on the things I know would interest me and which I wish to see,” he told me how he planned his travels. “I have never in my life arrived at any town or city without knowing well beforehand what to expect and what to look out for. Believe me, this has paid off handsomely.” And the well-stocked travel sections of his bookshelves lodging his large collection of travel pamphlets, guide books, maps and brochures was testimony to his wide interest in and knowledge of the world.

The trouble with most people who travelled, according to Laurie, was that they seldom had the enterprise or initiative to prepare themselves for what they were about to see, and consequently were either disappointed or bored with foreign towns and cities which actually had a great deal to commend them if the traveller

only took trouble beforehand to discover their many attractions. “For happy, truly rewarding travel an amount of intelligent research is always vital. Without this the would-be traveller is merely wasting his time and money, is bound to have a lousy time and would be doing himself a favour by staying at home,” was his opinion of those who left all arrangements to travel agencies and stuck religiously to wellworn tourist routes, and he had scant time for travellers who had not bothered to follow the simple procedure of a little inquiry before setting out on their journeys.

There was not much about London that Laurie did not know and love. To roam the streets of the West End, Soho and the City with such a knowledgeable and enthusiastic companion was a never to be forgotten privilege, a cherished memory which time and the company of other congenial travelling companions will never erase. He could, I know, have written a lively book on London as realistically informative as any of his best-selling South African works with, I am certain, a chapter or two on the city’s restaurants and hotel dining rooms which would have rivalled or outdone the best gastronomic guides. And there are many leading eating establishment managements who would have gnashed their teeth in rage at Laurie’s deadly denunciation of their so-called superiority. But he could never be induced to do so. “My specialisation is South Africa,” was his stock reply whenever I suggested he devote a year’s work to a book on “Laurie’s London”. “I

leave this sort of thing to H. V. Morton who is able to do a much better job than I. Read his 'The Heart of London' and you will see why I would not try and compete with this sublime researcher and author."

Once, in his early days when Laurie was eking out a meagre living on a London newspaper and hating every minute of it, he was asked to sub-edit an account of the Cenotaph wreath-laying ceremony handed in by a young fellow reporter. "Don't cut this about too much," he was told by the editor who had given him the job of sub-editing, "the fellow who wrote it is good." "The 'fellow who was good' happened to be H. V. Morton," chuckled Laurie when telling me this. "A marvellous understatement. Morton was then quite unknown, of course, but I could tell from the report he handed in that he was certainly a good writer – just how good he showed later when he became world famous as the author of so many excellent travel books – and I did not have to change a word."

Years later when he had himself become famous in the literary field he was invited to a luncheon at which H. V. Morton was present. "He did not remember me," said Laurie afterwards, "and I considered reminding him of how we once worked together on the London newspaper and I found myself having to read through his work with the view to slashing and correcting it. I think he would have found the story amusing but I did not wish to run the risk of introducing a jarring note into the lunch-time



conversation and so kept quiet.” This was but one example of his natural reticence and sensitivity to the feelings of those whom he liked and respected, which coloured his life and made him the shy, lovable and considerate person he was.

During these early days in London between the wars when Laurie was reaping journalistic experience by working on a morning newspaper from dusk to dawn, and was trying to supplement his small salary by writing magazine and newspaper articles at the miniature bedside table of his cramped bedroom at his cheap and depressing Paddington lodgings by day, he was often hungry and frequently cold. “Apart from my air force days on Salisbury Plain during the First World War, the time I spent in that dreary bedroom and working my guts out on the morning newspaper were the most miserable of my life,” he looked back in repugnance on his time in London as an ill-paid journalist.

“I hadn’t two pence to rub together in those days and spent what little free time I had in museums and art galleries trying to keep warm. But I learnt to know London backwards the hard way, and the dreadful contrast between my unpleasant living and working conditions at that time and the manner in which I was able to indulge myself later sharpened my appreciation of the best restaurants and places of entertainment, and I have never lost the opportunity of making up for lost time and ground as far as good living goes.”

Just as he always made a point of visiting the scene of his unhappy months in the bleak Royal Flying Corps barracks on Salisbury Plain during World War I whenever he was in England, he also invariably took a taxi to the gloomy lodgings where he had occupied a postage-stamp-sized room during his equally unhappy London newspaper days, every time he went to London. Here he contented himself with strolling past the forbidding boarding house and standing on tip-toe to get a glimpse of the inside of the ground-floor bedroom which had served him as a dingy sleeping and work room during the desperate year he was supporting himself as a semi-freelance journalist.

These journeys into hideous nostalgia were, he admitted, of a highly psychological nature, a deep-rooted compulsion for self-punishment which could only be explained by a psychiatrist. But he could not wean himself from making these pilgrimages which aroused only feelings of deep depression, and I was never able to talk him out of the unnecessary and painful habit he had fallen into as if by some inexplicable form of mental rote.

On one occasion he got me to accompany him to the gloomy old four-storey house in a mean back street near Lancaster Gate. "That," said Laurie pointing to a ground-level bedroom window, "was the scene of my abject misery you have heard so much about." The window curtains were drawn back and we could see

into the room. He drew my attention to the clutter of books, a typewriter and a half-empty wine bottle on the small table near the window. "With that evidence it can only be occupied by a journalist," he said with feeling, "probably some poor young bastard in exactly the same position of near penury I was forty years ago. Nothing has changed. With only a little imagination I can picture myself sitting uncomfortably at that very table hopefully hammering out a one-guinea article for some second-rate publication and wishing like hell I was back home in South Africa." Then, having rubbed fresh salt into his old past wounds, he could not climb back into the waiting taxi quick enough, and he did not mention our peculiar visit again during our whole time together in London. But I knew that he would repeat this strange procedure every time he was there, and he reported shamefacedly each occasion he returned to South Africa after a trip to London that this had, indeed, been the case.

Wherever Laurie went it was almost certain that at some stage his delicate stomach would play up and force him to take things easy until he was again fit enough to enjoy the good food that played such an important part in his life. His faulty digestion was frequently the cause of great disappointments and, on many occasions, much to his disgust, he would have to forego a particularly glorious meal at a restaurant he was eager to patronise by a last minute attack of excruciating indigestion and malicious stomach upset.

I recall two particular occasions when Laurie's hypersensitive stomach robbed him of eating pleasures to which he was particularly looking forward and which he was always to regret as lost gastronomic experiences at two of Europe's leading eateries. Once in London I invited him to dine at exclusive Mirabelles in Curzon Street. He accepted the invitation with keen anticipation and sent out for the restaurant's *a la carte* menu several days beforehand so that he could take his time selecting dishes of his choice, and he went about his task with the enthusiasm of the true connoisseur he was, deliberating carefully and marking off various items to a short list before settling for *coquilles Saint-Jacques*, *chateaubriand bearnaise* and a bottle or two of wonderful old Marc de Bourgogne. But we were not to enjoy the exquisite cuisine of London's premier restaurant. The night before our appointment he was stricken suddenly with a rebellious tummy and did not see the inside of five-star Mirabelles until a year later when he treated himself to a £10 lone dinner with one of the best French wines money could buy as compensation for his previous dining let down!

On another occasion the exact thing happened to Laurie in Paris the morning of the night I had arranged to take him to dinner at famed Maxims. He phoned me in distress from his room in the Anglo-American Hotel. I went round and found him propped up in bed, pale and drawn with a glass of prescribed stomach "settler" at his elbow. "John, old boy," he greeted me glumly, "my damn' stomach has

knocked me out again and I am afraid that I will have to miss dining with you tonight. And let me say that a dinner with you at Maxims would be a highlight of my life.” He was so genuinely disappointed and upset that I promised to book a table for another evening and, as queasy as he was, he immediately cheered up at the prospect.

But, alas, he had not recovered sufficiently three days later when I had to fly to Barcelona, and the opportunity of him and me tasting the magnificent dishes and expensive wines he had earmarked on the menu of the Mecca of Paris gastronomy did not present itself again; and Laurie never forgave his capricious stomach for doing him down and cancelling out the chance of trying the food at the only really top-notch Continental restaurant he was never to enter.

Yes, Laurie loved good food and noble restaurants. But, contrary to popular misconception, he was never a large trencherman. He was, in fact, all his life rather a small and fussy eater despite the opinion of those who formed the erroneous idea from his preoccupation with the culinary arts that he was given to gourmandising. In all the years I knew him he was rarely guilty of over-indulgence at the dining-table. But the little food he ate had to be good and he never objected to paying a high price for restaurant meals as long as they were of the standards he expected. He knew just *how* all foods *should* be prepared and

served and never accepted second-best cuisine or service in any restaurant with a high hotel guide-book image and price-list to match. A poor, over-priced meal would as often as not result in him sending for the *maitre d'hotel* or restaurant manager who would receive a quiet but firm admonishing lecture on the establishment's unpardonable shortcomings, and the eatery in question would there and then be scratched from his list of worth-while dining places.

As an experienced traveller Laurie had wide and varied interests. These, however, did not include antiquities. Ruins he could skip and he would seldom work up the curiosity to traipse around old monuments to past glories when there was so much else in the way of nautical and natural history museums, libraries and public gardens to see. He and I were together in Rome on two occasions in the late 1960's but, breaking his own golden rule, at neither time did he bother to research the ancient relics of the Eternal City and so knew very little about them. "Rome," he said, "is quite a pleasant place, but not my favourite by a long chalk and I could no more think of living here than living on the moon." It was, I am sure, his basic dislike of old stone and marble piles and his almost total disinterest in ancient European history which coloured Laurie's outlook on Rome.

My mother, on the other hand, had for many years been a keen student of modern and ancient Rome. Her delvings into the historical past of the city had, in its

completeness, fired her imagination and emboldened her to start writing a compendious study of the Eternal City a short time before she died. So strong was her affection for Rome that she requested me in a private letter to be read after her death to supervise the scattering of her ashes over Shelley's grave in the Protestant cemetery there. While he admired her accumulation of knowledge and the depth and thoroughness of her research, and encouraged her to write her book since she had proven journalistic and writing talent, my mother's enthusiasm for the life and times of ancient and contemporary Rome never communicated itself in any way to Laurie. And he and my mother seldom saw eye to eye as to the manner they would fill in their Roman days together. My mother hated museums, could not abide motor drives into the countryside and resented wasted time in cafes and restaurants which kept her from her beloved ruins, old buildings and the solemn perusal of her well-thumbed and carefully annotated guide books.

Laurie, on the other hand, was unable to tell the Colosseum or the Parthenon from the American Coffee Bar in the Via Nazionale, and had no real desire to change this state of affairs since, he said with force, he had seen enough antiquities in Egypt and Palestine during the Second World War to last him a lifetime. And as for statuary! The only features of these proud works of bygone Roman art, be they by Michael Angelo or lesser time-honoured sculptors, which he found at all thought-provoking were in the spheres of the anatomically ribald. Once, when leaving the

National Museum to which he had been taken under protest having other things to do, he drew me aside from my mother's hearing and with a theatrical dead-pan expression and a twinkle in his eye, confided his theory as to the male figures' obvious and seemingly universally common mutilations.

"You must have noticed that the penises are nearly always missing from the old marble statues. I have often wondered why and today I think I have come up with the answer. I am sure this is the work of a certain type of male suffering from a form of masculine jealousy who haunt museums with small hammers hidden in their pockets, surreptitiously knocking off the male appendages when the gallery attendants' backs are turned." There is probably a more scientific archeologically valid reason than this for the loss of sculptural manliness, but Sigmund Freud would no doubt have been delighted with this morbid psychological explanation!

Though my mother tried her utmost to arouse his interest and influence him to share, to a small extent at least, her overriding absorption with the Roman past, Laurie, who was as often as not always prepared to go some little way in trying to take an active part in activities which gave her happiness, drew the line at anything more energetic than short token visits to old historical relics of her choice.

This half-hearted approach to ancient culture did not in the slightest satisfy my



mother who, failing utterly to understand his lackadaisical attitude to the abundant art of Rome, considered him an incorrigible Philistine when it came to an appreciation and understanding of the finer artistic things of life.

But like Jack Spratt and Mrs Spratt, he and my mother hit upon a more or less amicable method of licking the Rome platter clean by going their separate ways during the day-time – he to explore the shops, railway museum and stations, zoo, small villages outside Rome and the pavement cafes on the Via Veneto and the Corso, she to lose herself in the past among the crumbling temples of the Forum Romana and the emasculated statuary of the Campidoglio and the Vatican Museums – until early evening when they would link up for drinks at the hotel bar-lounge for a discussion of the happenings of the day.

Rome, Laurie thought, to my mother's keen disappointment, overrated. He made it clear that although every place had *something* to offer he preferred just about any other European city one cared to mention and only deigned to put up with the city of the Caesars for the congenial company when my mother and I were around to relieve his usual travel solitariness. Indeed, as far as I could make out, there was only one aspect of the Eternal City which made any impact on him at all and this was of a triteness difficult to explain in a man of his sensibility and wide mental horizon. Never, he said in all seriousness, had he been in such a large lift

as the one conveying passengers from the ground floor to the roof of St Peter's, and he chuckled with child-like amusement each of the many times he told the story of the American tourist who, turning to him in the eighty person or so capacity lift during a ride up to the roof, cried out in amazement, "Say, bud, this elevator sure makes anything we have back home in Dallas look like the Yankee Stadium!"

Yes, the huge Vatican lift was one of the few sights that really impressed Laurie about Rome, and although he suffered from height effects to such an extent that he could not occupy a flat more than two storeys above street level, he nonetheless heartily recommended the St Peter's lift – to hell with the ancient ruins, marvellous statuary and glorious architecture – as one of Rome's major wonders and more pleasing attractions.

The July humidity with the temperature hitting the high eighties and Laurie hunched over the air-conditioning unit in his bedroom in the luxury-grade Quirinale Hotel, as one sits warming one's hands over a roaring fire in mid-winter, in a hopeless attempt to keep cool, contributed to some extent to his dislike of the city. After eight days during his second and final visit in which, he said, he had thoroughly exhausted the relatively few possibilities of Rome, he sought refuge from the summer heat by catching the express to Naples and never

showed the slightest desire to see the Eternal City again. It was not that he had anything specific against Italy or Italians, although he viewed Italian cuisine and cooking as particularly limited and colourless and, apart from Spanish, perhaps the most uninspiring in Europe – and the quality of food and restaurants could make or mar a country as far as Laurie was concerned. He also admitted that although he liked Italians as a whole and found them courteous and helpful, their accents when they spoke English grated harshly on his ears and had an unattractive quality absent from other English-speaking Continentals like the French and Scandinavians, two nationalities for which he had particular leanings.

But he saw a lot to commend the country and thought Venice among the most pleasant winter resorts (he objected to the unbearable heat and the strong smells from the Grand Canal in the sultry summertime) and expressed the opinion that Capri, although displeasingly tourist-ridden at peak season, was possibly the most beautiful island he had ever seen. But, being claustrophobic since early childhood, he could never, like his stage heroine, Gracie Fields, or fellow author, Francis Brett Young, think of buying a villa and living there as the evening departure of the last ferry-boat for the mainland aroused feelings of near-panic at the prospect of being isolated, even for one night, in the middle of Naples' Bay.

Laurie had experienced this feeling of intense unease some years previously when

he took an intermediate ship to St Helena where he marooned himself for several weeks to investigate the island's inhabitants and certain little-known features of Napoleon's exile for a book he was to write. "I have never felt so trapped and shut-in as I did on St Helena," he told me on his return home. "It didn't take me long to complete the work I wished to do and I had to cool my heels doing nothing for some time before the arrival of the Union Castle liner from England to pick me up again. I found the island a prison from which I longed to escape. The towering cliffs and the narrow valley in which Jamestown is situated oppressed and depressed me no end and there were often times when I climbed the highest peaks simply to scan the empty horizon for a friendly sight of a puff of steamship smoke. One needs a particular type of mentality to stay on an island for any length of time; without this, I am convinced, it would be quite easy to go mad."

Capri, he said, would be an ideal island on which to end one's days provided one did not suffer from claustrophobia and had enough money for gracious living.

"Unfortunately I only qualify in one of these respects, so a life on the island could never be for me. I must live on the mainland overlooking the sea or else I have the wretched sense of being incarcerated. But a fine day's outing on Capri is hard to beat and I have always enjoyed the ferry-trip across the bay from Naples,



Laurie at 'The Briars', St Helena. The little pavillion occupied by Napoleon before he moved to Longwood. The island brought on Laurie's claustrophobia and he felt trapped beneath the towering cliffs.

knowing I will be back in my comfortable room at the Vesuvio Hotel on the mainland by nightfall.”

As with the spacious Vatican lift, Laurie’s responses to places of interest were often of an unusual and sometimes of a most disconcerting nature. It could rarely be predicted just what his reaction to a scene or situation would be or exactly what would seize his imagination or stimulate his great sense of humour. It was perhaps his mental aptitude for grasping the essentially prosaic and commonplace at the expense of the more orthodox and acceptable which moulded him into the front-ranking, accurate and unbigoted South African writer and historical researcher he became. A boat trip into the confined cavern of the Blue Grotto brought on an expected attack of claustrophobia as he was sure it would long before he ducked into the cavern mouth, and he wrote off the famous watery cave as just another stop on the habitual tourist highway, not really worth the trouble of seeing, to which he had gone only because he believed that for a writer it is essential that even the most well-trodden tourist routes of the world should be tramped if an author wished to maintain satisfactory rapport with his readers.

And so he lost himself among the teeming milieu of chattering day-trippers to the island, taxied up the hill to Ana-Capri to stand for a few exhilarating minutes admiring the dramatic view of smoke-wreathed Vesuvius across the azure Bay of

Naples from the open terrace of the Villa St Michele, ambled contentedly about the sun-drenched streets admiring the neat, colour-washed houses just like any first-time-abroad tourist, and relaxed on the swimming pool apron of Gracie Fields' seaedge restaurant with a glass of amber Frascati in his hand. But his thoughts, even during the comparatively few times he found himself treading the well-worn paths of proverbial tourism, could never conform to those of the majority of his wide-eyed, excitedly impressed tourist companions.

People, said Laurie, were always more important than inanimate things and one could learn a great deal more from human beings than from decaying relics, splendid scenery or old, musty works of art. It was often the unconscious humorous remarks, philosophies, observations and manner of speech of local inhabitants which he remembered more clearly than the obvious tourist attractions and which gave him the most pleasure in his travels about the world.

"I came away from Capri," he told me in Paris after his second and last outing to the island, "with a simple story which illustrates exactly how I feel about people and travel. I hired a Carozza, an open horse-drawn buggy, to take me from the harbour to Capri village. Halfway up the precipitous road the old, white-haired Italian driver who until then had remained stonily silent, suddenly turned round in his seat and volunteered, quite unexpectedly: 'My arse has Hinglish name,

Georgio’.

“I was completely taken aback by this gratuitous information and racked my brains for a polite response as I pondered the riddle of how it was the ancient cart driver had a backside named Georgio. It then struck me that what he was trying to say in his faulty English was that it was his horse, not his arse, that was called George. Most people would, I know, fail to see the humour of this, but as my middle name is George, it struck me as amusing. To me Capri will always be associated not so much with its Mediterranean villas, picturesque bathing beaches or the renowned home of Axel Munthe, but with that grizzled old Carozza driver whose arse and I, for a few farcical seconds, shared a good old common Anglo-Saxon name.”

In later life, when he had carved his niche in the South African literary field and was in a position to do a great deal for shipping companies and travel agencies by way of testimonial in his travel narratives, he received many offers of free travel or of travel fares at reduced rates in the hope that he would comment favourably in his widely-read books on the standards of the various travel services provided. Rarely did he avail himself of these generous offers, several of which, he agreed, were most enticing and evoked considerable thought before he regretfully turned them down. “In my early years when I had no money and yearned to travel I



would have jumped at these opportunities. But to achieve and maintain any merit as a writer one must be entirely honest with oneself and with one's reading public. When such honesty is deficient the writer descends to the role of literary confidence trickster; and people who buy and read books deserve much better than this from authors. To be honest the writer must be free to write the truth as he sees and feels it, no matter on whose toes he treads, as long as he conforms to good taste, common decency and the laws of libel. Without this personal discipline a writer can easily become the paid hack of those to whom he has placed himself in bondage, and grossly misleads those who pay to enjoy his work.

“If I accepted the many offers of free trips I have had in my time I would have been compelled through obligation to write what my sponsors wished me to write, not what I really wanted to write, and I would have been guilty of literary prostitution. This I could never countenance and I would rather give up writing if I felt it necessary in any way to compromise for the sake of saving money by getting something on the cheap. No, I always pay my own way and I am absolutely free to give credit where it is due and to criticise when I feel criticism is justified. I have made a few enemies with my disparagements but I am certain I have made far more friends by being completely outspoken in recording my personal views and observations.”

Despite his aversion to taking anything for nothing, be it a free restaurant meal or the present of a first-class steamship ticket, there were one or two occasions when, having made it clear to the sponsoring company that should he avail himself of preferential treatment he could give no guarantee that he would bow to the dictates of commendatory advertising, he did accept complimentary passages overseas. But this he did with misgivings that it was likely through his high code of frank scrupulousness he might ungratefully have to bite the hand that had fed him when the voyages were over and he came to mention them in print.

I can remember only one entirely free voyage, the passage he took to South America in the mid-1960's on his own rigidly uncompromising terms, which he could later write about in fair and glowing terms without having to submerge his conscience or give the shipping line concerned the slightest cause for dissatisfaction. "I wish that all voyages were as memorable," he reviewed this South American cruise. "I would save a fair amount of money by taking up the many offers of free travel I get every year if I could be sure of this. But, sad to say, this would not often be the case. I had only genuine praise for the ship, the food and the manner in which I was so well cared for. A car and a guide were laid on for my convenience at every port we called at and I was entertained royally at shipping line expense even though it was known that I could not be induced to twist the truth in any way and that my published observations and impressions

would be as critical as I thought necessary. Thankfully I had no problem in this respect. In my next book I was able to incorporate a long chapter on South America in which I could give the ship service, cuisine, entertainment and comfort the fullest due without defrauding my readers or upsetting anyone.”

Only once in his long and august literary career did he agree to accepting payment for outright advertising – a glowing tribute to the South African Railways – a step he later had doubts about taking and which he never repeated once his head and shoulders portrait and his accompanying personal recommendation for travel by S.A.R. had appeared in local newspapers. With his life-long passion for trains and his particular penchant for the Blue Train on which he had made several comfortable journeys, the fee of fifty pounds was of little consideration. To Laurie pleasant travel in agreeable surroundings with perfect service always deserved its just rewards; although he would never have considered boosting a purely commercial enterprise, his unusual action in lending his name to a published approbation of the State-run S.A.R. was motivated purely and simply by his strong sense of public altruism. “But I really should not have stooped to this sort of thing,” he chastised himself stringently after the final newspaper lay-out of his recommendation for train travel had been shown to him and he was assailed by uneasiness about what he had done. “Publicity of this kind does not do an author any good, it appears cheap and can damage his reputation

in the eyes of his public by creating the impression that he is so hard-up he must come down to business huckstering to make a living. An established author should steer clear of all forms of undignified advertising.” Blaming himself severely for an irrevocable error of judgment he waited with ill-concealed self-conscious impatience for the contracted period of the S.A.R. advertisement to run its course.

It is beyond my recall to count the times during our long friendship that I waved him off from railway stations as far flung as Cape Town, Rome, Paris, London, Calcutta and Rangoon. The number, I should say, would be near the sixty mark. Since those early days in the late 1920’s when he so quietly entered my life as the tall, boyishly slender substitute figure for my departed father, he was constantly, and as the years rolled swiftly past and he ascended the rungs of literary fame and fortune, increasingly on the move to near and distant places. During his last twelve years he travelled overseas fourteen times and had covered well over 40 000 miles of England, the Continent and South America by train and motor coach in his search for new and mentally inspiring travel experiences. When circumstances allowed I was always on the quay or station platform to bid him *Adieu*.

As he grew older Laurie, who had formerly thought nothing of setting off at a

moment's notice on the many taxing motor trips necessitated by his job as a newspaper reporter and feature writer, and cheerfully took all-night driving in his stride, wearied of long car journeys and avoided them whenever he could. Of all the travel methods available he considered train journeys second only to the satisfaction of congenial ship-board life as the safest and most pleasurable manner of getting from one place to another. But not all train journeys were necessarily his bowl of *bouillon*.

Underground rail systems brought on his claustrophobia and although rapid modes of transport, he invariably shunned the "tubes" and selected taxis or the front upper-deck seat of slower buses from which he was able to see what was going on around him when he travelled short distances about the cities of Europe. "I can see nothing agreeable about being confined below street level and whipped along dark tunnels at frightening speed with a crush of impatient humanity," he explained his antipathy to underground travel. "I formed a bad impression of the Manhattan Underground when I was travelling about America during Prohibition. It was grubby and uncomfortable and this impression has persisted and now applies to all Underground systems. I never travel by the "tube" these days if I can get where I am going some other way. Incidentally, it was on the New York Underground that I first came across the professional hat thieves I had often heard about. They certainly pack them into the Underground coaches there and once the

doors are closed the passengers are so tightly wedged they can't lift their hands above their waists.

“The hat thieves stood on the platforms at rush hours waiting their chance. As the trains pulled slowly out of the stations they casually reached into the moving carriages through the open windows and snatched hats from trapped passengers who was utterly powerless to do anything about it. The surprised looks on the faces of the victims as the trains drew away from the platforms defied description. I would never have believed it unless I had seen it myself, and I saw it happen time and again.”

The crowded New York Underground and its impudent hat thieves may possibly have created in him his moderately good-natured dislike of all Underground rail systems, but it was undoubtedly an incident on the Paris *Metro* which set the ultimate seal on his adamant determination not to travel by this means ever again. I had asked him to accompany me to Montparnasse from our hotel near the Gare De'lest and suggested the Metro as the quickest and most convenient way of getting there since the station entrance was just across the way. Laurie, having first looked hopefully and vainly up and down the street for a taxi-cab, agreed provided we would return to the hotel by bus after I had completed my business in the Latin Quarter. He was restless and ill at ease on the hard coach seat as we

rattled over the points towards the Place D'Italie under the streets of Paris.

At Bastille a young, pale-faced girl entered our carriage. Her fear-flecked eyes, wildly disordered hair and anxious hand movements told a story of severe emotional distress. As the train gathered speed she leapt for the door, slid it open against the force of vacuum and prepared to jump into the path of an oncoming unit. Laurie and I were paralysed to inactivity by shock. Only the quick reflexes of an army corporal passenger who dive-tackled the girl at the last second, pulled her back into the coach and held her screaming and kicking on the carriage floor until she could be handed over to *gendarmes* at the next station, saved her from certain death. Laurie was deeply perturbed by this incident, climbed shakily from the coach at Arsenal station, breathed the rain-washed Paris air with relief, and we continued across the Seine bridges on foot to our destination. It took him two neat *cognacs* at a nearby *bistro* and several days to get over the distressing experience and never, whether it was in London, Rome, Madrid or Paris, did he ever make a journey by underground again.

Paris, to Laurie, was third after London and Nice as the world's most fascinating city. En route via Paris to other cities or towns, he would always arrange to leave the train at the Gar St Lazare or Gar de l'Est and stroll through the city by the boulevards and back alleys to catch his connection at the Gar du Nord or Gar de

Lyon, savouring the rich street odours, inspecting the menus outside small family restaurants and calling in at produce markets to price, for his own information, the plucked poultry, skinned rabbits, rich red tomatoes, mounds of lettuces and fresh Brussels sprouts.

We were together but twice in the French capital and although I returned to the city again several times on my own afterwards my visits were never quite the same as they had been with my energetic and knowledgeable friend and companion.

Although he argued that no one could possibly claim to know a place without actually having lived there, and often cruelly snubbed those who expressed dogmatic opinions after only brief holiday or tourist stays, I can attest to the fact that Laurie (who would have cast out the suggestion as being completely incorrect in no word-mincing terms) knew Paris almost as well as he knew London, which is certainly saying something.

He had been to Paris many times during his Fleet Street days when the weekend fare from London had not strained his resources to too great an extent, when, he said, youthful exuberance, the excitement of the pavement cafés and the delight of chestnut trees in blossom along the wide boulevards had more than balanced the paucity of francs in his pocket. “Once, you know, after I had received a small



unexpected windfall from a London newspaper which had accepted a short story and article, I found myself after the show at the Folies Bergeré entertaining the whole cast to drinks at the bar. And what a crowd of girls! Don't ask me how it happened, I just don't know. The party went on until daybreak, cleaned me right out and I had a hell of a job scraping enough together to pay my hotel bill next morning. I wouldn't do this sort of thing nowadays, of course, but Paris is an education which should be a compulsory item on every young man's travel itinerary."

The last time Laurie saw Paris he and I were together. I had asked him to break his coach journey across the Continent to Venice to spend some days exploring once again the museums, night clubs in the Place Pigalle and the elegant shops in the Rue de la Paix and the Champs-Elysees with me, and he said later he was glad he had. Our hotel high up the Rue La Fayette had during the German occupation been commandeered for a Luftwaffe officers' mess, still had the aged French porter who had served his German masters as orderly while at the same time acting secretly as Marquis courier between the Cannes and Paris underground movements and had paid for his double-dealing by having his fingernails extracted with pliers at the notorious Gestapo headquarters in the Avenue Foché, but now contained two good restaurants which featured as specialities of the house *escargots de Bourgogne* and *Coq an Vin*, two dishes high on Laurie's

popularity list, and a large, well-stocked wine cellar which brought joy to his epicure's heart.

Laurie wished to conduct an experiment in the cause of culinary and guide book accuracy by personally checking the veracity of one of those publications having astronomic sales by purporting to tell tourists of limited means exactly how to enjoy Paris within a bone-cutting daily budget. This book, containing a chapter on cheap eating establishments, itemised, in particular, various restaurants offering low priced meals and carafes of *vin ordinaire* which penny-pinching travellers were advised to patronise to effect heavy savings on their holiday expenditure. For two whole days, following these recommendations in good faith, the street map references led us to sleazy, unappetising *bistros* tucked away (as well they might be!) in narrow, cobbled, ill-lit side streets off the Avenue de l'Opera, the Etoile and Boulevard Montparnasse where we were sloppily served dreadful dishes of fried sausage and lentils, suspect meat balls lost for all time in tomato sauce, huge slabs of unbuttered bread and vinegary wine on bare-topped wooden tables by contemptuous waitresses, in the company of unshaven labourers in black braces, collarless, off-white shirts and mud-encrusted boots. And we nearly starved to death!

“The book probably has a *soupçon* of merit,” Laurie justly summed up our

depressing findings the night we gratefully abandoned our guide book test and were making up for lost time and possible vitamin deficiency with *chateaubriand bearnaise* and a vintage bottle of Chateau Haut-Brion at the Tour d'Argent, "provided one has a bird-like appetite and is able to exist on precious little in the way of inferior food and drink. But I am willing to bet that the man who compiled the book now has a suite at the Ritz or Crillon and only dines at the Tallevant or Maxims on the terrific royalties his world bestselling volume must bring in."

## CHAPTER 5

### FRIENDS, INDEED

*The man that hails you Tom or Jack,  
And proves by thumps upon your back  
How he esteems your merit.  
Is such a friend, that one had need  
Be very much a friend indeed  
To pardon or to bear it. William COWPER.*

A man is judged by the company he keeps. If this be true then Laurie Green, on the strength of his friendships alone, can be said to have reached the pinnacle of others' esteem and his own self-regard since, during a colourful lifetime spanning seventy-two splendidly interesting and varied years, he had always shown a marked degree of fastidious selectiveness in the choice of those admitted to the intimacy of close relationship. And considering the hundreds of folk he met, interviewed and with whom he entered into regular correspondence in the course of his incredibly prodigious writing and travels these were, by his own design, relatively few. From the end of World War II, when Laurie by his devoted dedication to the high demands of the writing craft and the sheer persistence of his relentlessly driven and disciplined will had reached the goal of public

acclamation as his country's most regularly productive bestselling author, there were those in increasing numbers as claim to acquaintanceship with such a well-known, successfully popular author became a *cachet* symbol of social approbation, who through the all too human motives of wishing to bask in reflected glory saw themselves as friends after only a few impersonal social or business dealings. Most were not and, according to his definition of the qualifications necessary for friendship, could never hope to cross the boundary of mere casual acquaintanceship into a closer, more deeply embedded and meaningful emotional relationship.

He guarded his privacy jealously, sometimes by unnecessarily uncalled-for abrupt, off-hand or downright affronting measures for ensuring his safety from the unwelcome approaches of those with thick-skinned temerity who tried to crash the closed inner circle of old, well-established friendship on the slender grounds of brief and passing acquaintanceship. That his sharp rebuffs did not always win him popularity or liking, Laurie did not care. He had no time for such opportunists and, he reasoned, could easily get along without the cluttering of his life by those who climbed upon the band-wagon of others' success. To him true friendship was sacrosanct, of intense value, to be nurtured and protected with no thought of any personal axes to grind, a priceless gift to be proffered with caution and accepted only with reserved restraint until proven *bona fide* by sincerity.

Rarely did he mind hurting the feelings of those whose deficit of sensitivity earned them, to his way of thinking, the outright snubs and discouragements for which they put themselves in line.

But having acquired his liking, respect and confidence one could not wish for a kinder, more sympathetic and generously loyal friend.

His genuine friendships, firmly cemented by the hardening mortar of passing time, nearly all forged during his early years in journalism before he became a household name, consisted almost entirely of well-trying and tested newspaper colleagues and congenial sailing companions of halcyon yachting days on *Innisfallen*, *Ametia* and *Lulu*, when he had proportioned his time between the abominated routine of earning a living on the "Cape Argus" and relaxed weekend enjoyment at the Royal Cape Yacht Club, were all without exception open-hearted, totally candid and enduring. Once committed to friendship Laurie could be relied upon to uphold his side of the mutual trusting contract with a full measure of sympathetic understanding which weathered the ups and downs of fluctuating circumstance, unless the receiver of his trust chose in some manner to badly let him down or tried to take unfair advantage of his friendship. And once deceived Laurie, who weighed the actions and motives of others entirely by his own high standards of what he thought right and wrong, found it hard to

resuscitate his lost faith.

To those who had, in his opinion, delivered a slap by grossly transgressing the accepted rules of friendship, he would seldom turn the other cheek, and they, by destroying his confidence, forfeited usually automatically and for all time the staunchest of friends, a most agreeably amusing companion and a selfless stanchion of support, encouragement and practical assistance in times of their misfortune. In this respect he was the hardest and at times the most unreasonable of men. But he had long ago made up his mind exactly what true friendship entailed and he was not prepared to alter in any way his high ideals or mask his feelings merely to satisfy those who would disagree. Bogus and fairweather friends had no part at all in Laurie's plan of things.

His oldest and closest friends could be numbered on the fingers of both hands, Carel, Birkby, "Paddy" Cartwright, Scott Haigh and Henry Hope, all to make their names in South African journalism or as best-selling authors; and André Steytler, George Miller, Wilfred Copenhagen and lovable Nigel (Scotty) Southerland, the first three one-time shipmates on the old *Innisfallen*, to name but eight whose friendship he valued to the very end of his life or theirs above all possible price. And all became, through association with Laurie, my own lifelong and dearly loved friends.

Laurie, himself the possessor of a keen sense of the ridiculous, maintained that he could never be drawn into an intimate relationship with anyone in who this trait was absent or not well-developed. It was, he said, her quick and facile sense of humour which attracted him to my mother when they first met, and he pointed out that a common characteristic of all his friends was their ability to see the subtly amusing aspects of life and a propensity to laugh easily at themselves and their adversities; not one had ever showed the slightest leanings towards pomposity or bombast. And his friends certainly filled the bill for harmless hilarity to Laurie's complete and utter satisfaction.

"Take my old friend George Miller, for instance," Laurie never tired of talking about his friends or of chuckling at the well-remembered humorous happenings in their lives. "He was perhaps the unluckiest man I ever met; everything that could go wrong seemed to happen to George. The very first day he joined the *Innisfallen* he ran up the deck to secure a sheet, tripped on a metal cleat and broke both big toes. In those days George was a young man and had just landed the then badly-paid job of Assistant Manager to the Cape Town City Orchestra. He was usually short of money and couldn't afford to spend much on clothes. One morning he was standing on a corner in crowded Adderley Street waiting for a girl he was taking to lunch when a well-meaning friend sneaked up behind him and playfully grabbed the well-worn seat of his trousers. To both their dismay the whole seat came away in George's



friend's hand and George was left standing in the centre of Cape Town at peak hour with a vital portion of his pants missing.

“One night after he had been paid his pittance from the orchestra George and I went to the cinema – the old Tivoli which was then the most popular place in Cape Town for Friday night entertainment. George dropped his lighted cigarette. Unfortunately the man in front of us had placed his hat on the floor under his seat. George's cigarette rolled down and burnt a huge hole in the brim. George reached for the hat, furtively examined it and stealthily slid it back under the owner's seat without calling his attention to the damage, whereupon the woman sitting behind us tapped George on the shoulder and spoke up in a nasty voice, ‘If you don't tell him, I will’.”

An accountant by profession, George eventually obtained a post in Nairobi and left the Cape for Kenya with sadness at parting from his old friend, but promising faithfully that his annual leaves would be spent in Cape Town. Laurie was no less sad at parting from George, and it says much for the strength of their friendship that during the forty-two years George lived away not a month went by without he and Laurie corresponding. Twice wounded in World War I, and a K.A.R. officer during the second, George was dogged by ill-health most of his life. He was, said Laurie with wonder at his resilience, a miracle of survival as George, on many occasions given up for lost, was always snatched at the last moment from the closing jaws of

death and bounced back happily to normal health with the resistance of a man less than half his age. "And we must not forget the time unlucky old George was trapped overnight in a Cape Town lift," Laurie was anxious that all George's disasters be recorded for posterity. "He had taken a girl he hardly knew to the cinema one Saturday night and on the way home he decided to fetch something he'd forgotten at his office. George had the key to the building and he and the girl entered the lift and pressed the button. The lift stuck between the second and third floors and, since the office building was entirely deserted, George and his companion had to spend the whole week-end together like a couple of caged monkeys until released by the janitor on Monday morning. All they had with them to see them through their long trial was a box of chocolates and the weekend edition of the newspaper."

I was glad that Laurie preceded George to the grave for he would have taken the loss of his old friend badly had dear George gone along before.

Laurie helped Henry Hope get his first job in journalism. Henry joined the crew of *Innisfallen* shortly after the First World War and told Laurie he was looking for something to do. Laurie who saw in Henry a kindred spirit approached his father, then editor of the "Cape Argus", who, upon discovering that young Henry was the son of a famous headmaster and had had a sound classical education at a good

English public school, immediately engaged him as a cub reporter. Laurie's friendship with Henry remained as mutually deep and sincere until Henry's death two years before his own as it had been during the course of their earlier yachting and newspaper association. It was Henry who took over the Wanderer's desk when Laurie left the daily "The Talk of the Tavern" newspaper column he himself had started, to become the paper's magazine editor, and their high regard and respect for each other ripened with the passing decades.

Henry had spent a period of early manhood on the Orange River diamond diggings, a rough, tough prospecting life which stood him in good stead when he came to leave the "Cape Argus" for a seat on the South African Diamond Board. Henry went on to make a fortune, lost it, and returned with laudable philosophical acceptance to the "Cape Argus" and "The Talk of the Tavern" column he had left with ambitious hopes twenty years before. The manner in which Henry took his disappointments and the uncomplaining way he picked up the threads of his broken journalistic career in middle-age showed, said Laurie, the wonderful character of his curlyheaded friend and he was prouder than ever at numbering Henry Hope among his closest associates.

Laurie once played an amusing practical joke on Hope. "Henry was always game for anything," he delighted in the way the gag nearly backfired. "One day I bet him that

he would not walk down the street from the 'Argus' office without his shoes on to a certain shop in Adderley Street where he could choose a new pair of shoes for himself at my expense. Henry at once accepted the challenge and set off in his socks down busy St George's Street and out of sight round the corner with me and the rest of his colleagues gleefully watching his progress from the windows of the 'Argus' editorial office."

"But the whole thing fell abysmally flat. No one appeared to notice that Henry was in his stockinged feet. This was obviously not good enough since I did not relish the thought of paying for a new pair of shoes for nothing. I felt I had to get my money's worth somehow from the situation. Then a clever thought hit me. I phoned the shoe store and in an agitated voice asked whether a tall man in a navy blue suit but shoeless had by chance come into the store. 'Yes, he has just this second arrived,' replied the bewildered shop assistant. 'Thank heavens,' I said, 'he's a harmless mental case who slipped his attendants while being escorted from a mental home to consult an eye specialist in town. But don't be alarmed, he is not dangerous in any way, he merely has a compulsive fetish for men's footwear and I have been phoning all the shoe shops in the area as he was bound to turn up at one of them sooner or later. Whatever you do, keep him there until his attendants arrive to collect him.'

"Half an hour later Henry returned to the office with a puzzled expression and a new

pair of expensive black leather shoes for which I had to fork out five pounds ten. ‘Most peculiar people in that shop,’ he told us as we gathered round with straight faces. ‘They just would not let me go. Every time I found a pair of shoes I liked and said I’d have they insisted on showing me more. I must have tried on two dozen pairs before my patience ran out. I only got away by losing my temper and threatening to smash up the store if they didn’t let me have the pair I wanted.’ It was several months before I plucked up courage to tell Henry how he had earned his free pair of smart black shoes.”

Laurie always relished a clever practical joke and in those days the “Argus” office was the scene of many goodnaturedly conceived and adroitly executed pranks which raised hearty laughter at the selected victim’s discomfiture.

“There was an old criminal court reporter who had ‘covered’ the Cape Town courts for as long as anyone could remember and was extremely popular with local magistrates, attorneys and police,” he told me of a macabre hoax pulled and which went wrong when he was still a young journalist feeling his way. “An irrepressible joker on the paper, for reasons known only to himself, started the rumour that the old court reporter had died suddenly, and the news reached the Caledon Square Police Barracks. On the day of the ‘funeral’ we looked out of the window and to our horror saw a contingent of grave-faced, white-gloved

policemen drawn up on the pavement outside in St George's Street. They had been sent as a funeral escort to the old reporter who, at the time, was very much alive and was away on his annual holiday."

As The Wanderer columnist on the newspaper a portion of Laurie's working day was set aside for interviewing members of the public who called on him with, as they imagined, interesting items of information or unusual objects which he might feel disposed to write about in his "Talk of the Tavern". And he was never surprised at who might be ushered into his office by the department messenger.

"One morning," he said, "Nervo and Knox of 'The Crazy Gang' and Victoria Palace fame blew in having just arrived on holiday from England. And, oh my, what a couple of humorists! They told me that on their way to board the ship at Southampton they came across a group of post office workers setting up a new post-box on a street corner. Knox walked over officiously, introduced himself to the foreman as a high-up post office official and asked what on earth they thought they were up to.

"When the foreman explained, Knox shook his head admonishingly, feigned extreme anger and raged in a cowing voice, 'There's been a great blunder here and someone's going to pay for it. The box is to be put up on the corner at the other end of the street, not this end.' The workmen were instructed to move the

pillar-box to the correct street corner immediately and Nervo and Knox, having supervised the heavy box carried up the street and firmly cemented down in entirely the wrong position, blithely carried on to catch the ship for South Africa!

“A little while after they left the office there were streams of people – newspaper staff and others – walking about the passages and up and down the stairs with strained, peculiar looks on their faces. Investigation revealed that Nervo and lincox had had special ‘out of order’ notices printed and had fixed them to the doors of every lavatory in the building.”

Later, when a feature writer on the “Cape Argus”, Laurie was given a young, newly joined assistant to train and to help him with his work-thin, bespectacled and ever-smiling Carel Birkby (whom he later taught to drive on Verneuk Pan) who, although many years younger than his instructor, was to join the ranks of Laurie’s most trusted friends and confidants. Carel, according to Laurie, was a most charming, intelligent pupil with a marked aptitude for newspaper work and a decided flair for writing. “I realised at once that here was a young man who would go far in the writing profession provided he had the right guidance,” he thought a great deal of Birkby’s capabilities, “and I am happy to think that he was able to gain something from my long newspaper experience and could learn a little from what I had to tell him.” He was not wrong in his prediction of Carel’s

potential as a writer. Birkby went on to become the author of several stirring books, including an excellent history of legendary Pagel's Circus, two best-selling novels, hundreds of first class newspaper features and the chief reporter on the "Johannesburg Sunday Times".

What Laurie liked about Birkby was his unfailing cheerfulness and his physical courage. "There was little Carel would not do in the way of taking risks for a good newspaper story," he genuinely admired Birkby's willingness to accept assignments which he himself would think twice about attempting. "The 'Argus' once ran a most successful magazine series on unusual and risky experiences, and Birkby unhesitatingly volunteered for the job of taking over the assignment with complete disregard for his own safety. One of the episodes, I remember, was a long and dangerous climb to the top of one of the tall wireless masts which had recently been erected at Milnerton. At great risk to himself, Birkby, watched by car loads of anxious spectators parked along the roadside, clambered up the metal struts to the top in a strong SouthEaster in record time and wrote a most realistic account of his feat for the next Saturdays magazine section. Just reading his article brought on an attack of vertigo and turned my stomach, which goes to show what a fine descriptive writer Birkby was.

"Another enterprising exploit for the series was when Birkby explored the bottom



of Table Bay in an old fashioned diving suit. This may not sound particularly daring now, but in those days diving was still in its infancy, the gear was far from safe and the use of available diving apparatus at that time, especially by a rank amateur, was extremely hazardous. But Birkby welcomed all his rugged assignments and carried them out better than anyone else on the staff could have done.”

For years, whenever an important story “broke”, Laurie and Birkby travelled the country together, often setting out at a few hours’ notice to the far corners of the Union to record the news as a perfectly co-ordinated news-hunting team for the “Cape Argus” well ahead of their competitors – the spectacular Orange River Floods, the dramatic return home *en masse* of the Trek Boers from their self-imposed exile in Bushmanland, airline crashes, ship wrecks and treasure digging on the inaccessible wild Atlantic coast, and the intimate human backgrounds to intriguing murder investigations – all meticulously reported headline dramas which Laurie carefully tucked away in his filing cabinets and in the pigeon-holes of his mind for use in the books he knew he would some day get down to writing.

It was impossible for him to remember which of his friends was the oldest in terms of time since they all went back such a long way. The choice, he thought when pressed, probably lay between Wilfred Copenhagen, Henry Hope and André

Steytler, but he was inclined to think that André, by a short head, was perhaps the one he had known longest.

A member of an old-established Cape Town family and the son of the then Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, known widely as “Pope” Steytler on account of his autocratic administration of church affairs, André was yet another who formed a cherished, lifelong friendship with Laurie while a junior crew member of Upington’s *Innisfallen* in the early 1920’s – a friendship, like all his close attachments, which weathered the inconstancy of ever changing time and was, if anything, stronger, more resolute and trusting in middle and maturer age than it had been in the full flush of its exuberantly youthful heyday.

“In his younger days Andrd was the indisputable Don Juan of the yacht club and the envy of us all,” Laurie’s mind was never far away from the happy cruises and delightful sea-going companions of far-off yesteryear. “Thanks to André we never wanted for attractive feminine company. He was a handsome chap in those days with thick blonde hair, and he knew every pretty girl in town, most of whom he seemed to bring down regularly to the Club for our approval. And I never knew him to pick a dud. Old Upington disliked women and objected to having them aboard and André had his work cut out ascertaining Upington’s weekend movements before he’d risk bringing one of his many beauties down for scrutiny

and an afternoon sail. It broke André's heart when he began to lose his hair, and although he must have spent a fortune on hair preparations, these magic elixirs could not save him from the tragic fate of total shiny baldness before he'd reached the early thirties."

Employed in a clerical capacity by the South African Railways and obliged to support his mother and sister on his slender wage, André never had much over in the kitty for himself after dividing up his pay packet. "And yet at one stage," said Laurie, tickled at his impudence, "he somehow managed to own a yacht, a race horse and a motor car all at the same time. But that was André, a man worthy of admiration, who never stinted himself of the finer things in life merely because he did not earn a large salary."

Despite his impecunity, by means of a few years hard saving André took himself off overseas from time to time to enjoy for brief periods the costly pleasures of Europe. The story is told that one morning while sitting at a table outside the Cafe de la Paix, reading "Paris-Soir", wearing a wide-brimmed black hat, smoking a fat cigar and sipping a *pernod*, André was hailed by a surprised Cape Town acquaintance aware of his slim finances, with the words: "Good heavens, André, what on earth are you doing in Paris?" André nonchalantly flicked the ash from his cigar, gave an airy wave of the hand and without batting an eyelid replied in

mock seriousness: “Studying art, old boy, just studying art.”

In his yachting days he was a well-built, athletic youth who, to keep in trim, made a habit of rowing *Innisfallen's* dinghy up and down the yacht basin for an hour or two at a time. The Club watchman and general factotum, an illiterate old Portuguese who had retired ashore after years before the mast on square riggers, observed André's rowing feats with considerable interest. One day he took Laurie into his confidence: “Dat-a friend of yours, young Steytler, has-a many big muscles here” – he flexed his own biceps to show the portion of André's anatomy to which he alluded – “but-a what a pity he has such-a little up-a here” – and he tapped his forehead to indicate what he considered André's lack. André delighted in this story against himself and for many years before he died suddenly of a heart attack used it as his most often told diningtable anecdote.

A. P. (Paddy) Cartwright, another newspaper colleague of long standing, was for many years Laurie's favourite hunting companion. A man of rich humour “Paddy” was present as a high ranking naval officer at the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay at the end of the Second World War, became the wellknown author of many books and occupied the editor's chair of a large South African newspaper. “‘Paddy’ Cartwright was one of the hardest working, most conscientious journalists I ever knew,” said Laurie of his old colleague and friend. “He com-

bined his versatility with a first-class talent and tremendous output and was, to my mind, the perfect all-round journalist.”

When time and circumstances allowed there was nothing he and “Paddy” liked better than getting off together to walk the lonely farm veld at the numerous invitations of their many farmer acquaintances with good “shooting” on their properties, in leggings and old, beat-up clothes, with rifles cocked and ready, stalking fleet-footed bush buck and fast-flying game birds during the open hunting season. Laurie was a poor shot with rifle and shotgun and rarely brought down a buck, pheasant or guinea fowl himself. But he enjoyed the exercise and the company of experienced hunting men who knew what they were doing and the anticipation of perhaps adding another notch to the small number on his gun butt with a keenness far outweighing the disappointment of an empty hunting bag when the day was over.

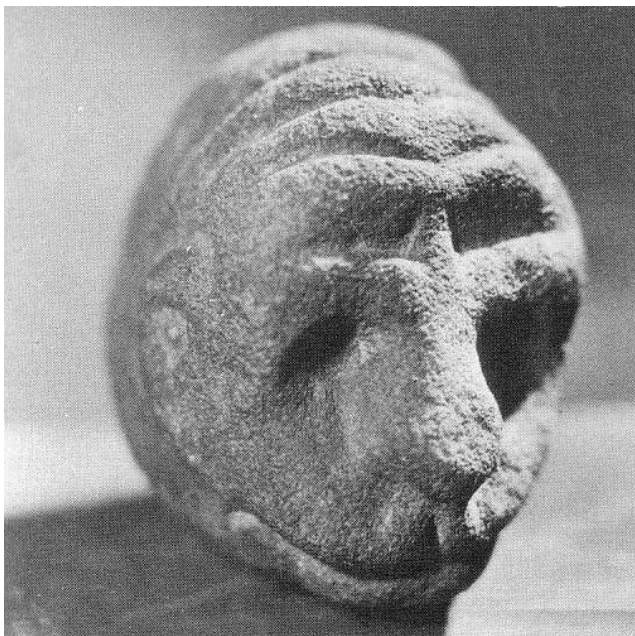
“ ‘Paddy’ and I and two or three others were once driving into Clanwilliam on a shooting trip when a small buck suddenly sauntered across the road in front of us,” Laurie was a little ashamed of this hunting story and only told it in certain company whom he knew would not be offended. “I stopped the car and one of my companions reached for his rifle, followed the buck into the bush and brought it down with a magnificent shot between the eyes at eighty yards. When we

collected the animal we saw to our dismay that it had a bell and a leather collar with its name inscribed on a silver plaque round its neck! Someone in the neighbourhood had just lost a pet! We were all put off hunting for that day and spent the rest of the afternoon filling up at the village pub.”

Another old friend from the Innisfallen and yacht club days who shared Laurie’s love of the sea and with whom he entered into a deep and lasting friendship was Wilfred Copenhagen, a young analytical chemist who was to become renowned as a leading South African authority on corrosion and reached the rank of Commander in charge of South African Navy training in the Second World War. “ ‘Copey’ was a good sailor even in those days when we were all fairly new at the game,” Laurie said with affection, “but I recall an incident through no fault of his which put us in a nasty situation for a few minutes and could have had serious results had it not been for ‘Skipper’ Upington’s quick thinking and superb seamanship. We were coming into the yacht basin under full sail to pick up our moorings in a hard blow when ‘Copey’, who was standing by with the boat-hook to grapple the mooring-buoy, lost his footing and came down on both knees with a crack like a couple of pistol shots. We hastily clawed out to sea again with poor old ‘Copey’ rolling on the deck in agony with both kneecaps broken. But, happy to say, it did not take him long to recover and rejoin us as a valuable, well-liked member of the crew.”

Coincidentally it was another research chemist, one of the few friends with no sailing or newspaper connections to act as catalyst, who was also to play a life-long role in his precious sphere of faithful friendships, and one with whom Laurie at all times felt greatly akin. Nigel (Scotty) Sutherland, with his sharp Rabelaisian wit and unselfish open-handedness, a year or so older than Laurie, whose career, among other accomplishments, included amputating a wounded comrade's leg with a penknife at the Battle of the Somme, and several years as the Cape Town broadcaster of the popular weekly chemistry-for-the-layman series under the apt pseudonym "Retort", was the crafty originator of the intriguing Baboon Head Mystery which Laurie featured with a picture in his second book, "Secret Africa", and over which he for a long time racked his brains and tried his utmost to find an answer. In 1933 "Scotty" went along with Laurie on one of his frequent jaunts into the barren Kalahari Desert in search of book material. In the small general dealer's shop at Mariental village the store-keeper handed Laurie a brownstone object the size of an orange with the explanation, "Here is something that will puzzle you. Take it back to Cape Town, show it to the scientists, see whether you can find out who made it. Keep the thing anyway – I am tired of staring at it and wondering".

The shopkeeper could only say that a Native had brought the object to him saying that he had found it in a Bushman cave somewhere in the Kalahari Desert. The



The mysterious baboon head which puzzled Laurie and confounded the experts.



native doubted that he could find the cave again and left after having been tipped for his trouble. Laurie turned the carving over in his hand, examining with interest the deep-sunk eyes, wrinkled brow and pouched lips of an “old man” baboon. “Look at the back of the head,” said the shopkeeper, “you can see where it was carved on the rock wall of the cave and hammered away. The marks of cleavage are distinct.”

Laurie knew that Bushmen worked only on flat surfaces, painting the walls of caves with hunting and animal scenes; he had never heard of Bushmen as sculptors and felt he was on the verge of a great scientific discovery.

On his way home through South West Africa he showed the baboon head to men who knew Bushmen, farmers, policemen and wandering natives who had spent their lives in the territory. But all shrugged and shook their heads. None had ever seen a carving like the one Laurie had stowed in his knapsack. The experts at the Cape Town Museum were equally mystified; if he could only find the cave with one more head actually forming part of the rock then Laurie would have made a discovery of far-reaching importance. A leading sculptor pondered over it. “Good workmanship,” he opinioned. “Almost too good for a primitive native. But I can tell you definitely that no modern tools were used on this stone.”

Laurie consulted the Abbé Breuil, the eminent French prehistorian and

archaeologist, who thought the head undoubtedly very old and most likely the work of primeval man, but apart from saying that it was a significant find, could not help in identifying its origin.

A long time later, when Laurie had written other books and had shelved the mystery at the back of his mind and was using the baboon head as a desk paper-weight, “Scotty” came clean. He had, he admitted shamefacedly, had the head fashioned in a quarter of an hour from a piece of sandstone by a Cape Town garage mechanic for the purpose of pulling Laurie’s leg, and had given it to the Mariental shopkeeper to hand over to Laurie with the story that it had come from a Bushman cave. And Laurie and the experts had been completely taken in!

“It was on this trip that ‘Scotty’s’ lively sense of humour was so much appreciated,” said Laurie after the baboon head “mystery” had been cleared up. “We came across a wretched Hottentot who had built his miserable reed-and-sacking hut on top of one of the huge rock outgrowths which dominated the desert plain. ‘Scotty’ assured us he knew the Hottentot language and I asked him to find out why the nomad had built his house in such an exposed position. ‘Scotty’ addressed the Hottentot in a series of unintelligible grunts. The flustered Hottentot replied in rapid-firing tongue clicks which ‘Scotty’ pretended to listen to and translate with complete understanding. ‘He says,’ said ‘Scotty, in entire

agreement when the Hottentot had finished his rambling monologue, ‘that he prefers to have his residence on an eminence’.”

There were other friendships just as warm and loved and cherished. These came later but were no less deep and enduring, the Thomases, Llewellyn and Ina, who, during his last weeks when mortally stricken Laurie was in need of helpful and sympathetic companionship, were at his sick-bed to the very end, and Scott Haigh; the author and old “Argus” colleague who was perhaps closest of all to Laurie in temperament and outlook. In perfect harmony with his friend, it was always to Scott to whom he turned when he required clear-cut views and counsel on matters that really counted, and in all the years of our affectionate relationship I never knew him to disregard Scott’s asked-for advice or make a major decision without first talking the matter over with the one whose judgment and integrity he so highly valued.

When Laurie was suffering and slowly dying in his Sea Point flat he once managed the few telling words which said exactly what perfect friendship meant to him. The nurse had given him a sedative to ease his distress when the doorbell rang. I had no alternative than to send the visitor away. Laurie, grimacing against pain, asked me who the caller was when I returned to his side. An old friend, I told him gently, who under the circumstances I had asked to leave. Despite his

discomfort he was not at all pleased with what I had done and took me mildly to task. “John,” he clung with difficulty to painful wakefulness, “there is big distinction between acquaintances and friends. Friendship is the greatest of all gifts, and you have done wrong by keeping an old and dear friend from me.” And although in dire torment he made me phone to ask this friend to come again that afternoon.

## CHAPTER 6

### FRANKIE AND LAURIE

*To those who walk beside them, great men seem  
Mere common earth, but distance makes them stars.*

Thomas HOOD.

It is hard to say whether Frank Armstrong Wightman really fitted into the category of Lawrence Green's true and trusted friends. Described by one who knew him better than most as the original "Hippie" of this improvident modern cult, a loafer with a set distaste of work, Laurie saw in Frank another T. E. Lawrence, a brilliant and intrepid escapist personality with advanced mental capabilities well above those of his fellows. And Frank was to exert a profound influence upon the course of Laurie's life during the last twenty years of their acquaintanceship.

That Wightman's aberrant outlook, sarcastically tinted wit and grossly deviationistic way of life appropriated Laurie's attention and held him more or less enthralled for a longer period of time than the more usual and commonplace lives of his other friends, is well-established. Of those who crossed Frank's path most tended, after a short time, to dislike him and cast him from the sphere of wanted friendship for the ungrateful sponger he so often showed himself to be.

Others, mindful of his many faults and attempting to understand them, took a more tolerant view by seeking excuses for his laziness and finding justifications for his uncaring selfishness. Laurie and I were in the latter group. Why, we never really stopped to think, since Wightman the “Taker” rarely gave way to Frank the “Giver”, and friendship with the sardonic, gnome-like little man was at most times a radically one-sided affair with Frank always ungratefully on the receiving end. But this graspingly unfair aspect of Frank’s personal relationship with others somehow never entered mine or Laurie’s mind to any appreciable extent. Taking Frank completely for what he was we were both contented in our acceptance of his ungrateful, easily disrupted friendship. Agree that Wightman, to the foundation of his peculiar nature altogether insulated against the emotional and onerous claims of sure and lasting friendship, possessed some rare chiasmic magic, and the reason for our indefinable attachment is perhaps not too difficult to understand.

Laurie found Frank interesting and stimulating, as did I, despite the self-seeking aspects of his wilfully indulged and ungenerous nature – had found him worth more than normal consideration, Laurie said, from the day in 1922 when Frank had with a solid blow struck the shackles of conformist subjugation by giving up the struggle of wresting a livelihood in the marts of trade and moved aboard his little boat anchored nearby Laurie’s own in a sheltered corner of the Cape Town

yacht basin as a self-imposed semi-exile, until the hour of his death at seventy-four in 1970 when, broken in body and feeble of mind, he passed away in the charity ward of a public hospital. A long, long time.

Wightman was an enigma in practically every respect, had been from his earliest school days when school friends wrote him off as a sarcastic, disagreeable little boy with an inability to mix with others, and Laurie all his life had been intrigued by riddles. But Frank remained a puzzle which Laurie never solved entirely to his satisfaction. A challenge to his ever questioning mind, Frank was, said Laurie, the most curiously fascinating person he had chanced to run across. But a whole book about this strange and surly misanthrope? To many just a waste of time. To Laurie, thinking differently, a chance to prove his deep and utter belief in Frank's superiority. Twelve months it took, a year of writing toil, and at its end "A Giant In Hiding" which Laurie proclaimed of all his published works the only real and worthwhile book he had ever written. Windjammer seaman, philosopher; yachtsman, cable operator on the lonely islands of Madeira and St Lucia and the fever-ridden wireless stations of South America, drifter, writer, nature-lover and social misfit, the Wightman saga so conscientiously chronicled by Laurie in "A Giant in Hiding", regardless of being fluffed out with side-issue detail to make a thicker volume, is, indeed, engrossing reading.

After a life of wandering Frank took the step which was to make possible his assured niche in the annals of sea and sailing literature. In 1947, having with his own hands built thirtyfour foot Wylo, an ugly yawl-rigged yacht patterned on Pidgeon's *Islander*, he set off in the ketch with a younger companion for the West Indies, sold the boat a year later in Trinidad and returned to Cape Town to write his first book about his adventurous journey. Laurie acclaimed his little friend's enterprising yachting and literary undertakings. Frank, he said with unspared praise, had through his book and magazine articles come to the fore as a natural writer of immaculately delicate prose, whose vivid powers of description and poetic feeling for the English language placed him in the forefront of the greatest of sea story-tellers, right alongside Conrad, Dana and Melville. In Laurie's estimation "The Wind Is Free" was a true and moving classic of the sea, a most gratifying and commanding contribution to the world's maritime literature. And he was not at all surprised when later the book was taken up for publication under the exclusive Mariners' Library imprint and sold throughout the world as seriously recommended reading for those who liked the sea and a tale of physical endurance.

There is no denying the merit of "The Wind Is Free" as a literary masterpiece of its type. Despite the view in certain quarters that the book is only to a small extent the result of Wightman's writing skill there is between its covers no word



or line or sentence which is not entirely Frank's own. There were many (and Frank had detractors unwilling to give him credit) who, knowing of his friendship with Laurie and aware that Laurie having encouraged him in setting down his story had penned the introduction, grasped the opportunity of debunking by suggesting Laurie as the real author of the beautifully inspired and excellently written book. This was not so. Never in his career had Laurie agreed to play the role of literary ghost for any so-called writer, and Frank with his inborn writing prowess had not the slightest need for such dishonest and unnecessary misrepresentation. True, Laurie did give Frank some assistance in the production of "The Wind Is Free", but this was of a non journalistic nature. A newcomer to the game of professional authorship it was, after all, only natural that Frank should approach Laurie for help with the technical problems so often encountered by the uninitiated in the monstrous task of knocking a manuscript into publishable shape. This, and introducing him to his publisher, was all that Laurie was ever called upon or would have been disposed to do.

That these untruthful rumours embarrassed Laurie and wounded Wightman is a belittling of the facts. From this time onwards, although Laurie had been in no way responsible for the loose malicious chatter, their friendship was never again quite the same as it had once been. Wightman, a person incapable of forgiving or forgetting when once his integrity had been questioned and his ego shaken

showed his deep resentment in many subtle and direct ways. Later, when he came to write his second book he did so in an aura of deceit and secrecy. Steering clear of any technical or general discussion with his old friend and refraining from even mentioning his writing project when they were together, Frank determined this time to handle all his writing problems in his own way by himself – and came to grief on the obstinacy of his unbridled self-conceit. “My Way Leads Me Seaward” was a clumsy and unimaginative title, the amateurishly designed and drawn jacket did little to increase the book’s chances. While well-written, for Frank could never be accused of sloppy prose or faulty grammar, the narrative lacked the dramatic content of its predecessor and was far below the gripping standard of best-selling “The Wind Is Free”. Had Wightman, blinkered by his self-regarding sentiments, but trusted Laurie’s judgment, swallowed his injured pride and drawn again a little upon Laurie’s long experience, the fate of the book may well have been quite different. But as it was, although pretending not to care one way or another, the failure of “My Way Leads Me Seaward” was to Frank, a perfectionist in everything he set out to achieve, a hearty blow from which he could not recover. Surrendering to a fit of merciless self-criticism which was characteristic of his nature, he never wrote another book again.

With his extraordinary extent of interests and knowledge encompassing as it did, the all-embracing range of the world’s ballet, art, literature and seamanship, all

subjects he mastered with the fantastic thoroughness of his quick, retaining mind, Frank, the man of defiant action and sovereign intellect, was to those who knew and tried to like him also one of intolerant spite and distorted vindictiveness. And Laurie Green, for all their forty-eight year friendship, enjoyed no dispensation from the well-aimed darts from Wightman's venomous and wellfilled quiver whenever Frank felt the malevolent urge to score a solid hit.

A matter for conjecture, it is debatable in retrospect whether Wightman ever had the slightest charitable feeling, fondness or regard for Laurie. Perhaps in his own individual and twisted way he did, although he seldom showed it by any overt actions. But Laurie, shrewd student of psychology that he was, had taken Frank's thought processes apart with the deftness of an adroit clinical dissector who had devoted a lifetime to sifting and exploring the mental quirks and idiosyncrasies of men in crowded places and desolate corners of the earth, and knew him inside out: "A first-class brain, in many ways near genius, I would say, although this term is often used too lightly. But Frank could never learn to come to terms with his size. Short men are usually known to carry a chip of some sort on their shoulder and Frank, despite his skill at intelligent rationalisation, is no exception. Inferiority. It is all there in the text books. In Wightman's case he has over-compensated for his lack of height by adopting an aggressively protective attitude of sneering cynicism.

“But he can only handle the difficulties of his situation according to the dictates of his own nature, as drastic and as extreme as these may appear. In retreating from the world and its competitive responsibilities Frank has exaggerated his fetish for outright individuality to the stage where it has become something of a mystically intriguing virtue to himself and to others.” An accurate, to-the-point analysis to which I as a psychologist subscribe without reservation.

A perfectly proportioned five foot two inches of sundarkened, sinewed muscle, Frank could never have aspired to the police force or a Guard's regiment, but the sharp acidity of his penetrating, sublimely well-read mind and boundless vigour should have more than made up for his lack of inches. But this was never so. It was said by some that Frank nursed a sensitive, easily scarred soul beneath his apparent hard-case, hypercritical exterior. But this was said only after his death and suggests perhaps an over-kindly, too generous and forgiving tribute to his memory. In reality, however, these words may not be far from truth although not in the context in which they have generally been applied, for Frank, wrapped securely in the perpetuation of his carefully constructed, resolutely preserved and blown-up myths about himself, was quick to take to heart all real or imaginary threats against the insecure framework of his ego and chosen way of life.

Frank was not a prepossessing figure in the physical sense. But, ah! that quietly

modulated and cultivated voice, rich and deep with the almost hypnotically soothing rhythm of the purest of possible speech! In faultless tempo with an acute and rousing imagination, the divine instrument for the communication of his towering ideas and explicit erudition, his marvellous speaking voice was assuredly the most compelling of his assets.

With the publication of “The Wind Is Free” Frank, averse to knuckling down and earning a living in what he scornfully called the cruel and heartless market place, found time heavy on his hands. He longed for Wylo and a solitary life far from the petty strivings of man and the city. Wylo’s new owner, a sympathetic millionaire who had read the book and knew what Wylo meant to Frank, offered him the boat back for nothing. All Frank had to do was come to Trinidad and fetch it. In 1949, elated Frank set out to recover his prize. He sailed her up to Baltimore, U.S.A., via the islands by himself and watched with loving concern her loading on the deck of a Cape Town bound freighter. “My escape”, he called her, “my blessed escape from the nausea of stupid social striving,” and sought a berth away from the prying eyes of the civilisation he professed so much to hate. The farthest reaches of lonely Saldanha Bay beckoned. Frank responded with alacrity.

For twenty years the little yawl anchored two hundred yards out from the Kraal

Bay shore was his home, closely guarded from intrusion by unwanted humans. Living in supreme isolation and savouring, so he gave out, every minute of his selected austerity, Frank revelled in the life of a complete hermit. Here, during these years of chosen loneliness he passed the long, undisturbed days observing and studying the botany and the wild life around him with the recording eye of a devoted naturalist – the snakes, ostriches, buck, wild cats, beetles and lizards and the explosive profusion of flora abounding on the lagoon edge. It is doubtful whether anyone ever came closer to nature at the Cape than Frank. Laurie said he ranked with the famous American naturalist-philosopher, Thoreau, whose authoritative work is still read after more than a century, but that Frank's knowledge and achievements in the field of nature actually even surpassed those of Thoreau. And this was probably so, for there was little in the way of lagoon insect, bird and animal life that escaped Frank's scrupulous attention.

Visitors were unwelcome on Frank's side of the lagoon, even those whom, when he wished a favour, he had not the slightest compunction of making use of when he wanted something done, and complained at Frank's frigid welcome and refusal to invite them aboard the yacht when, having made the eighty mile drive to look him up and take him things, they were met with morose ill-grace once he could be roused from skulking in the ship's cabin by strident blasts of their car

hooters. But Frank accepted friendship only on his own self-worshipping, inconsiderate terms and these did not include pleasant-faced hospitality when he was not in the mood to offer it.

My mother, wise to Wightman's selfish foibles but having a deep affection for him nonetheless, questioned how it came about that such a transparent posier was as lionised and sought-after as he was – a significant reality in his egotistical, uncaring mode of life – and why it was that Frank, often fawned upon, so easily got away with the open flaunting of all conventions while others much more worthy and appealing could not. The fact remained that he could and did. Although we tried to unravel the tangled skein of Frank's jumbled temperament, neither Laurie, my mother or I could ever ascribe his oddly repelling attractiveness to anything more scholarly advanced than a mystical form of personal magnetism which placed him with immunity well above the conventional rules applicable to others.

A polished actor, Frank would with his wonderful speaking voice and dextrous handling of the English language, I am certain, have carved an illustrious career for himself on the stage, in the pulpit or as a public speaker had his midget height and a-social nature not precluded him from such occupations and led him to the contemptuous rejection of conservative morality and the rest of humanity and

taken him to solitary existence on Wylo on the wild, unpopulated shore of the Langebaan lagoon. A waste, said Laurie, a great and tragically misused talent squandered on the desert air. And he was right, for Wightman's giant questing mind imprisoned as it was in his shrunken urchin body was patently designed for far greater destiny.

Although I had heard a lot from Laurie about the exceptional mind and physical stoicism of Wightman during the years I was growing up, I met Frank for the first time only after he returned from his Atlantic voyage and was deep in the throes of writing "The Wind Is Free" for publisher Howard Timmins. Laurie brought him round to my mother's house – a wizened, faded jeaned and duffel-coated person with a shock of wiry grey hair topping a theatrically expressive ballet face in which was set an aristocratic nose of Romanesque proportions – and my mother and I were at once captivated by his extreme fatalistic philosophy and his caustically dogmatic tilts at the sacred cows of purposeless convention. He had a way of making all he opinioned sound so believably right and true that we seldom contested his progressive views or countered with our own, and we took him to our hearts and into our home as an always eagerly awaited guest. I had just finished "The Razor's Edge" and Frank, to my then young and impressionable mind, at once became the embodied reincarnation of Maugham's mystical fictional character, Larry Darrell, with whom he seemed to have so much in



common in the way of unique individuality and bewitching charm. From this time onwards Frank called regularly, shaggy-haired and nut-brown from months in the lagoon sun, to occupy the spare bedroom, filling his days with “The New Statesman” and “The Observer”, and the works of Wilde, Salinger, Steinbeck and Graves, and propounding his lampooning thoughts and denunciations of established rules until, after a week or two of suburban idleness, it was time for him to heed the call of isolation and head again for the quiet lagoon and Wylo.

A spirit-stirring story-teller, Frank’s fascinating tales about himself recounted in that elegantly ornamental voice, Laurie and I soon realised, lost little in the telling, although Laurie was slow to admit this except reluctantly to my mother and me after Frank had told a tale we found hard to credit and a discussion followed later. It is not suggested that he lied. This would be too strong an accusation. It was just that now and then, powerless to resist his poetic flights of aesthetic fancy, Frank, we suspected, dressed his narratives with sequined fabrication the better to evoke in his listeners the necessary colour tones of vivid imagery for which he strived. Dramatically inspired inexactitudes would, I think, be a fairer, less obnoxious term for Wightman’s extravagantly formulated and impressive verbal embellishments.

While stationed in Montevideo in the cable service, Frank, whose interest in

ballet had started at the age of thirteen when he was taken to a performance at the Paris Opera House by his mother, had on the spur of the moment thrown up his job to follow the visiting Diaghilev Russian Ballet Company on its tour of South America. Since Frank was always reticent in divulging what precisely motivated him to take such an unusual and major step the true reasons remain a mystery. Rumour postulated that he fell desperately in love with a young ballerina in the *corps de ballet* and wished to be with her. Under persistent questioning Frank would sometimes admit half-heartedly that this was so, that he had a rush of passion to the head and had made a fool of himself by ardently chasing the unresponsive Russian dancer about the country to further his cause. But I have my doubts and so did Laurie. It is more likely, we thought, that he grew tired and bored with his work as a cable operator away from the mainstream of civilisation and, having saved a little money, indulged his love of classical dancing and of travel by unofficially attaching himself to the touring company as a hanger-on, but that this was a too prosaic and unglamorous reason to pass on to his admirers. Be this as it may, he came, he said, to know immortal Nijinski – had watched him slowly going insane – and divine Pavlova, and never missed a single ballet performance during the whole three months' tour.

Frank was in the third row at the last performance Nijinski ever gave, at the Teatro Dolon in Buenos Aires, when he took the lead in *Le Spectre de la Rose*.

Frank's description of Nijinski's dancing and enormous leaps from the wings and the manner in which hysterical matrons in the audience plucked priceless necklaces and brooches from their necks and blouses and hurled them to the stage at Nijinski's feet, were masterpieces of verbal prose guaranteed to hold all but the most blase of his listeners enthralled with every word. Hard fact or semifiction? Even Frank's closest confidants could never tell.

Many considered Frank an outright phoney and marvelled that Laurie, my mother and I, so willing to put up with the capriciousness of his calculatedly self-centred nature for so long, were so obtuse as not to see him for what he really was. This was incorrect. We did. Knowing all Frank's weaknesses but balancing these against his strengths, we made allowances which to others not as close to or as fond of Frank thought hardly worth our while or trouble. But only to a small degree were Laurie and I ever blinded by his improbable originality and the often hollow eloquence of his firmly expressed, plausibly scornful introspections. Among the cluttering flaws of Frank's strong but confoundingly confusing and inconsistent character lay the intrinsic attributes of delicacy of feeling, tenacity of purpose and of greatness which escaped those less perceptive and not as ready to delve and see the drives behind his actions. And these alone made Frank a tremendously exciting person to know and call a friend. Laurie and I liked Frank despite the imperfections in his nature, found him eruditely amusing and basked

unashamedly in the magnitude of his intellect.

Ungrateful to the core Frank used Laurie (as he did shamelessly most of his benefactors) with disdainful inconsideration which Laurie's other friends at times found hard to stomach.

"That aged scribbler of puerile potboilers," was once his reference to Laurie, the friend who had done so much for him over the years, in an acriminous letter to my mother from his Wylo retreat in Kraal Bay; and Laurie's baldness and incipient paunch were too often cause for brutally snide and disloyal comment behind his back when Frank, ridden by malevolence and, perhaps, a wave of physical inferiority feeling, sought to impress by airing his scathing vindictiveness in company. And yet it was to ever-accommodating Laurie to whom Frank usually turned for lifts to Cape Town when, after months entirely on his own, the harshness of the lagoon life began to get him down. And Wightman always ran completely true to selfish form even when, at inconvenience to themselves, friends were putting themselves out by doing a good turn. When at the end of the two hour drive to pick Frank up Laurie proposed a swim in the lagoon and a gentle stroll up deserted Fourteen Mile Beach, Wightman, who wished to be whisked right back to town at once and incapable of giving in good naturedly to this simple wish, adopted a childishly petulant attitude at having to delay an hour

longer. Although on each of the scores of occasions this contentious matter arose to end with Laurie determinedly parking the car on the road above Wylo's moorings and reaching for his swimming trunks, Frank remained stubbornly opposed to his desire for a short walk and a brief rest before the return journey. Having again been summoned to act as chauffeur, the next time Laurie turned the last bend of the lagoon track there was Frank teetering at the roadside, anxiously watching his arrival, ready and waiting for him to turn about and head right back the way he had just come, and the well-worn disagreement and Frank's unreasonable resentment started all over again.

This, then, was the preposterously self-centred but strangely socially sought-after truculent little recluse who, other than my mother, was the only person to exert significant influence on Laurie's life and occupy his thoughts for a lengthy and continuous period of time, and whom Laurie seemed utterly resolved in his writing to romanticise and magnify to somewhat exaggerated proportions. Frank's acquaintances after reading "A Giant In Hiding" shook their heads in disbelief. The Wightman emerging with such lustre from the pages of Laurie's characterization did not quite add up to the man they themselves knew. Booksellers and his reading public, habit-formed to the long list of Laurie's regular annual publication of nonfiction titles, considered he had erred in leaving the well-known path of accustomed literary format, on which his name was made,

to pioneer new ground in the sphere of unfamiliar biography. The book, to those who regularly bought his works and eagerly anticipated the yearly addition of new volumes to the ever increasing collection on their bookshelves, turned out a perplexing disappointment. Different from his other works, "A Giant In Hiding" was thought by many as an unwarranted break with established Lawrence Green tradition, to collectors of the patterned series an orphan publication, the contents of which failed to conform with Laurie's other factual works and caused disruption to the continuity of their standard volume compilations. Although the book did not do badly, its sales fell short of those of his previous works and also of Laurie's buoyant anticipation. But he did not seem to mind. The Wightman story, he told me, simply *had* to be recorded by *someone* as a heritage and he had been compelled to write it mainly to satisfy himself and for relieving his system of a compulsion he was powerless to resist.

Taking copious notes and tape recordings of his innumerable conversations and interviews with Frank, under the tacit understanding that not a line would he published until after Frank's death, Laurie, with notable fact-accumulating constancy, set his sights on being Wightman's first biographer. Indeed, uneasy that someone else may have had the idea and plan for such a book as there were several competent writers well acquainted with Frank and it was likely that one or two of these might have manuscripts prepared for publication before his own,

Laurie ensured the circumvention of such a possibility by “jumping the gun”, so to speak. He simply had to stake his claim ahead of others. The book, written, typed in manuscript form and lodged safely in his deposit box six months before Frank’s death, was presented to the publisher the day after Wightman’s funeral.

Knowing Laurie’s innermost thoughts and the secrets he usually liked keeping to himself, the reason for his anxious and apparent unseemly haste, in this respect, while at the time obscure to others, he made quite clear to me. In publicising T. E. Lawrence, Lowell Thomas had placed the flamboyant soldier-scholar squarely on the map and shot him to the heights of international fame as Lawrence of Arabia in his biographical book, “With Lawrence In Arabia”. Frank, to Laurie’s way of thinking, a figure of genius, romance and action, if not actually greater than then at least comparable to Lawrence, deserved the same treatment and world recognition. What Thomas had done for Lawrence, Laurie saw as his duty as a writer, researcher and appreciative friend to do for Frank Wightman. Although “A Giant In Hiding” did not have the worldshattering impact of “With Lawrence in Arabia” and failed to rocket Wightman to the stars of the international firmament it was, nevertheless, a memorable epitaph to an intriguingly patterned life, a sincere and respectful final salutation from one old friend to another.

As he had made a covenant with himself never in his writing to allude to those he

loved the best and who meant the most to him, in none of his books did Laurie ever mention me or my mother by name or inference. This was one of his strange and fast-held eccentricities. But my mother died three days before Wightman, and in “A Giant in Hiding” Laurie for once broke his strict literary practice by adding a chapter ending describing Wightman’s funeral with a heartrending epilogue to her memory and the depth of his own feelings: “So I saw the little *coffin* under the curtains in the Maitland crematorium. The service filled me with unbearable sadness, for I had stood there only a week before and said farewell to my best friend on earth; the woman who had befriended many people, Frank among them. They carried Frank’s ashes back to Oesterval graveyard. Frank Armstrong Wightman had returned to the lagoon for the last time.”

Yes, Frank Armstrong Wightman, the Giant in Hiding, to whom Laurie devoted an added, perhaps more balanced chapter in his final book, “When The Journey’s Over”, was to Laurie’s fertile, realist imagination and absolute conviction an intellectual colossus, a brain which the world of nature and of poetry and of English letters could ill-afford to be without, a man born well beyond his time. But in the final analysis of his long and unique relationship with this exceptional solitary of the Langebaan lagoon, it was to me and to those who knew them both and recognised true greatness when it was evident, Lawrence Green, not Frank Wightman, who strode forth as the real giant, a statement that I would not have



ventured to make in Laurie's lifetime, for he would not have liked what would have seemed to him such a ridiculously presumptive and fallacious assertion.

## CHAPTER 7

### JACKETS AND TITLES

*Invention flags, his brain grows muddy,  
And black despair succeeds brown study.*

William CONGREVE.

Lawrence Green, the best-selling, most prolific South African author of his time, was firmly convinced that the title and dustjacket could to a large extent make or break a book irrespective of whether its contents were above or below literary and narrative standard. A book, he told me on occasions when discussing the printing, format and artwork he envisaged for a volume he had completed and was about to hand over to his publisher, was merely a marketable product like any other on sale, the correct, attractive presentation of which was of prime importance in moving the article from the shop shelf into the home of the consumer.

Just as soap flakes and breakfast cereals are packaged in colourful, psychologically slanted sloganed containers to catch the eye of potential purchasers in bids to outdo their competitors, so it is necessary for books to be offered in artistically appealing, well-designed and carefully executed jackets with resounding titles which made the bookshop browser notice the volume among dozens of others and be prompted to pluck it from the shelf and flip

through its contents to see what it was about. While agreeing that books should not be judged only by their covers, Laurie was nevertheless sure that the primary duty of authors and publishers was to pay meticulous attention to the choice of book dust covers and titles before taking the irrevocable step of offloading thousands of printed copies on to retail booksellers. Too many authors and publishers, he said knowingly, overlooked this all important aspect of book publication and the results of their careless neglect and of shoddy writing could often be seen by the large number of remaindered books being offered at greatly reduced prices at bookshop sales. Such sales, he added, were often a help to would-be authors as by looking around they would realise what sort of books it was profitable not to write.

He had, he said, come to this conclusion through his own experience with the publication of his own, then, 32 volumes and a study of the sales figures of the basically good or inferior books produced by some of his writer friends and colleagues. In fact, he concluded, the selection of the right title and choice of appropriate jacket form was sometimes much more difficult than the actual writing of the book itself and usually gave him restless nights of disturbing contemplation before he came up with satisfactory ideas to solve the problem. As he always insisted on taking an active interest in the typeset, printing, art-work and marketing of every one of his books once he became established and was in a

strong position to call most of the tune, it is evident that he must have known what he was talking about.

But Laurie's pushing, often peremptory insistence in involving himself in the purely technical affairs of the production of his books did not always endear him to his publishers and printers. Although he laid authentic claim to an above average knowledge of the ins and outs of printing gained from close and amicable co-operation with the "Cape Argus" printing works staff during his many years in the paper's editorial department, and considered himself, by virtue of his nearly three dozen bestsellers, an authority on overall book production, his intrusion into the domain of printing and publishing often gave rise to considerable irritation and exasperation among those better qualified and more experienced in their own skilled specialisations. But he had strong, unyielding preconceived ideas as to the exact manner each of his books should be printed, advertised and sold. Unprepared in any way to fall in with counter-suggestions, no matter how valid or reasonable these might be, which did not conform precisely to what he had made up his mind he wanted, he could, at times, be maddeningly obdurate with those engaged in getting out his books on scheduled time.

Knowing that publishers and printers often thought him an unnecessary meddler in affairs which should really be of little concern to him, he frequently discussed with

me his unwelcome self-appointed role as technical and advertising adviser to those who felt, with certain justification, that they could get on with the job with considerably more speed and less trouble were it not for his constant finger pressing on the pulse of every feature of his books' production. But Laurie stood his ground. "Having his books sell well is all that matters to an author, nothing else. Art purely for art's sake is sheer rubbish. This is only a self-placating phrase eagerly grasped by writers and artists who have failed with the public and are seeking reasons to excuse their mediocrity as artistic creators.

"An author is an artist, a publisher a salesman. The success of a book depends mainly on the publisher's salesmanship after it has been written and printed. A bad publisher is really only a rotten salesman. But he must have an attractive looking article to sell in the first place and this is where the writer should assume full responsibility and be allowed his say. I leave the selling of my books entirely to my publisher and would not think of interfering, this is his job, not mine. But my publisher must leave the choice of printer, jacket artist and illustrations to my discretion and must follow my wishes to the letter; this is, after all, essentially the artistic part of the thing and falls outside the publisher's ability and scope."

I often argued, pointing out that as the publisher was taking the financial risk and was in business to show a profit on his publishing investments he should be entitled

to at least a major share in deciding how and where his books should be printed, how and where they should be marketed and, since it was he who had to foot the bill, which artist should be commissioned to design the jacket. But Laurie would have none of this. My view-point, argued down, applied, he said, only to new and unknown authors who were still trying to make their name, were completely at the mercy of their publishers and in this position could ill-afford to make ambitious demands which might antagonise their literary patrons. Most authors, he said, went through this unhappy circumstance during the early stages of working for recognition. Hadn't he himself had to put up with the meagre crumbs from publishers' laden tables for years before his book sales hit the bestseller mark? This was unavoidable and only ultimate literary success could place author and publisher on equal footing.

Howard Timmins was not only Laurie's publisher but also his loyal and sincere friend. Other than 9 of his works published in England by Robert Hale, Putnams and Stanley Paul, most of which were rehashes of some of his already locally published works suitably culled and re-edited for the overseas market, all 33 of Laurie's South African books were published under the distinctive Howard Timmins imprint of a typical African acacia tree, a cordial business and personal association lasting over twenty-seven years. Laurie, a hard and exacting task-master as far as the production of his books went, acknowledged Timmins as the

leading South African publisher; Howard recently told me that until a few years before Laurie's death when Laurie appeared to become a trifle autocratic and cantankerous with age, there had never been a written contract between them. For Laurie and Howard a most happy and profitable partnership. And, as happened with most of his friendships, my mother and I came to know, through Laurie, the large Timmins family, and Howard and Daphne also became our kind and helpful friends.

Laurie, as he grew older and, as he thought, more hardboiled, became more critical and finicky with and demanding of his publisher in regard to the presentation, sales and royalties of his books than he had been during former times. Having suffered several substantial stock market losses in the general financial setback which hit the country in the late 1960's, I can only explain his surprisingly hard-headed and often discordant dictatorial attitude towards Timmins as a panic reaction to his worry over money matters and his suddenly reduced income. Determined to extract his full weight of flesh from his writing labours Laurie, quite out of his normal reasonable character, showed on occasions few qualms at holding a powerful bargaining pistol loaded with persuasive arguments, heated ultimatums and even threats of taking his future books elsewhere for publication, at the well-groomed head of long-suffering but always good-humoured and diplomatic Howard Timmins. Howard, realising that Laurie,

a lonely, ageing man to whom the publication of his books meant a great deal, put up with his crabby perversity like the good and sympathetic friend he was. But there is little doubt that Laurie, during the last few years of his life, although mellowing considerably in his social relationships with others, became to all involved in the publication of his work the proverbial pain in the neck and progressively hard to deal with.

Noticing a change in his approach, which had formerly been so free and easy, to those in whose hands lay the publication and sales methods of his later books, I asked him how and why this change in him had come about. "Writing is my business, I'm in the game to make money just as a pork butcher sells meat and a draper deals in cloth for a living. There's no difference. The labourer is worthy of his hire, and I am just a labourer with a pen in the tough literary market," he answered with a frown that warned me I had transgressed upon uncertain ground. "To be successful a businessman must make sure he receives the highest possible profits from his business. I am an active businessman in business for myself, and looking after my own interests is all that I am trying to do and will continue to do as long as I am able to write a page or paragraph for publication. I don't intend ever to be done down."

In later years, after 1949 when I had qualified with degrees in the humanities,



Laurie, concluding that my M.A. in psychology had placed me in the class of advertising and marketing experts, assumed that I could help him with suggestions for sound, scientific ideas for the most psychologically advantageous presentation of his books, and for the first time took to consulting me on his book production problems. Of these I knew pathetically little, but he persevered with me nevertheless.

On the occasions when he was on the point of handing a completed manuscript over to Howard Timmins for submission to the printer, he always arrived at my house at 6 p.m. in high spirits and smiling in happy anticipation at the discussion to come, with the words I came to know so well by heart over the years: "Well, John, I've just finished my latest book and I think I've done a fair job. All except the title and the jacket is buttoned up. Now I'm here to pick your brains as usual, so let's hear exactly what you have to say." Over glasses of the best brandy and soda, with Laurie lolling comfortably in a high-backed armchair, he would launch into a brief summary of the book, put his spectacles on his nose and slowly run through his written list of several likely titles he had taken from one or two of his eight volumes of quotations which were always to hand near his writing desk, and wait expectantly for my comments and suggestions.

For half an hour or so he and I would be lost in animated psychological and

literary debate, both inquisitively attentive and analytically mindful of the views, suggestions and counter suggestions of the other while we hammered at the plasticity of Laurie's mooted title selections with hard mallets of verbal argument to try and knock one or other into usable shape. Each suggestion, broke down and examined from every angle, was modified, cast aside completely or combined with others just to see how it sounded and looked when written down.

Did this title carry the necessary message, does it give a clear indication of what the reader can expect? Will this one easily catch attention on the bookshop shelves? What of this one, does it have the necessary impact? And that other one? Why? Why not? Questions, questions, questions. Laurie and I loved our task of finding the best answers to his title uncertainties. And at the end of the session he always went away having fixed on a title he knew was the right one for the book we had discussed.

I am happy in the knowledge that since Laurie's "Where Men Still Dream" published by Timmins in 1945 and which to date has sold over 50 000 copies, I had some small hand in the choice of titles of each of his following twenty-seven bestsellers, including "When The Journey's Over", completed just before his death and published posthumously a few months after.

His casual acquaintances and regular readers have expressed surprise at his

intuition in titling his last book. A most prophetic title. Laurie, they are convinced, must have had strong premonitions when he came to write and name the book; a feeling he was soon to die, that this was the final work in his long and illustrious career, or why should he have christened the book with such a melancholy revealing title? To this, for the purpose of straightening the record, I must answer, nonsense. He never knew how ill he really was, the murderous nature of his disease was hidden from him until the very last and even on his deathbed he did not know the end was near and he talked of getting better and of taking a recuperative voyage overseas when he was on his feet again. But “When The Journey’s Over” was, in any case, to be the last book he intended writing in his well-loved series, and he selected this title as a conclusion to the unbroken succession (except for “A Giant In Hiding”) of his semi-historical and geographical works which had brought him fame and financial security. There was nothing more sinister or foreboding in his mind than this.

During the last three years of his life Laurie had threatened often to retire from the demands of writing. He felt that he had written himself out and thought it time to call a halt before he was reduced to scraping the bottom of the barrel for inferior material merely for the sake of keeping going. “For an established writer there is only one direction to go, and that is up,” he once said when I was trying to dissuade him from his intention of retiring and spending the remainder of his

life reading, walking on Blaauwberg beach and travelling. “Rather than work my way downward I must pack up now before, as a newspaper book critic recently suggested in reference to one of my books, ‘The old grey mare ain’t quite what she used to be.’ I have more than enough to live on and provide the luxuries I require for my self-indulgent nature and there are many places in the world I still have to see or would like to see again.”

To my mother, wife and me his periodic declarations that he was to retire permanently after the completion of the book he was currently working on caused considerable amusement. As his “last” manuscripts were finished, given to his publisher and the fixed dates for his previously announced breaking away from professional writing came and went with him once more embroiled in researches for yet another book, he found himself the butt of our good-natured wit which he himself took in good part and seemed to enjoy as much as we. To the family his retirement plans were always a joke, not to be taken too seriously.

But Laurie was genuinely tired of writing and I know that after the publication of “Full Many A Glorious Morning” in 1968, he really wished to rest and bow out gracefully from the literary scene once and for all. This intention he even went so far as to make known publicly by writing in the jacket “blurb” of “A Giant In Hiding” the words which saddened many of his readers: “This is a fitting climax

to his long career as a bestselling author.” As it was, he wrote and published another four books after 1968, “Harbours Of Memory”, “A Giant In Hiding”, “A Taste of South-Easter” and “When The Journey’s Over”, not because he particularly wanted to – except in the case of “A Giant In Hiding” which he felt he *had* to do – but on account of losses sustained through injudicious speculation on the unsound advice of so-called financial experts. He needed the royalties to keep him in the style he liked and to which he was accustomed, he told me with some magnification of the true position.

One of the best book titles Laurie had come across was Hemingway’s “For Whom The Bells Toll”. “It has the right ring of mystery about it, is short and easy to pronounce,” was his reason for placing this title head and shoulders above others of the thousands of books he had read since, when as a young boarding school pupil, he had discovered the delights of reading and secretly absorbed himself in the rousing pages of “The Magnet”, “Boy’s Own Paper” and “Billy Bunter” by torchlight under the bed sheets after lights out, and graduated to the classics and contemporary literature as he entered adolescence and started to grow up. “Hemingway picked a winner in finding this fine biblical quotation. If I could come up with something as good I would be practically assured of a bestseller before I even started to write the book.”

He was no Bible student. When I corrected him by pointing out that “For Whom The Bells Toll” came neither from the old or new Testament but from a seventeenth-century John Donne poem he, like Doubting Thomas, argued and would only capitulate once he had looked it up in his reference books. He then apologised profusely with a wry smile, saying I should have known that biblical literature had never been his strong point.

Enamoured by the Hemingway title the nearest he ever came to a name like “For Whom The Bells Toll” himself was with his “Eight Bells at Salamander”. “I like the sound of bells, literally and in print,” he delivered his casting vote at our usual pick-a-suitable-title conference in my sitting-room, “but I am a little worried that the public may be misled and put off by the word ‘salamander’; it could be thought that the book has something to do with newts and suchlike creatures, a natural history work with limited appeal. How many people will know, do you think, that salamander refers to Salamander Bay on the Langebaan lagoon?” I disabused his mind on this point and “Eight Bells At Salamander” was well received by the public who were not in the least led astray by the possible ambiguity of the title. The book sold by the thousand and he presented me with another feather for my cap as a dab hand at recognising the right title when I saw it!

Another word that took his fancy and which he firmly made up his mind to work into

a book title some way or another was “drum”. “Drum,” he suggested, conjured up romantically throbbing feelings and could have the exciting sound of the untamed jungle about it when skillfully incorporated in a title. It evoked a certain stirring of the blood with visions of primitive danger and high adventure. He was positive such a title would go down well with book buyers. However, after kicking round all the possibilities, he and I came to the reluctant conclusion that “drum” could not be fitted anywhere into our various complex word computations, and he appeared quite agreeable to eradicating it completely from his list of potential titles and forgetting all about it. But he was, I found out later, not by any means finished with the idea of “drum” as a key term in a book title. When next he compiled a book for his London publisher from his already published South African works he did not ask my views or have me at the christening. And “The Drums of Time”, he was fond of jokingly reminding me afterwards, proved, from the way it sold overseas, a more than adequate title!

One of his books opens in a South African Railways luxury dining-car with stories of chefs and stewards and memorable meals served on thick S.A.R. crockery with heavy plated cutlery while speeding over the dry Karoo plain. Laurie, with his intense interest in trains, favoured the title “Breakfast On the Train”. This I thought an excellent choice and said so. But he for some reason having a last minute change of heart and against my counsel, settled for a Shakes-

pearian quotation, “Full Many A Glorious Morning”, not, I am afraid, one of his more inspiring or appropriate titles and one which he later acknowledged as rather a feeble selection.

We also had our one huge flop. Years before, in his yachting days, Laurie and his sailing companions were in a Langebaan hotel when a local dissolute inhabitant well-known for his unwillingness to do a hand’s turn came into the bar on his usual round of cadging drinks. One of Laurie’s friends tackled this profligate on his proverbial laziness: “Tell me, Bill, why don’t you get a job and earn some money?” The worthless lay-about drew himself erect, looked aghast at this insult and replied, “My dear chap, a *decent* fellow doesn’t work!” Laurie never forgot this crushing answer and many years afterwards decided upon “A Decent Fellow Doesn’t Work” as the title for his 1963 book. I liked it, but my mother, having reservations, didn’t – she did not think it quite the thing. But he and I won the day and could not have blundered more in this particular title choice. Certain religious groups and readers with prudish old-fashioned notions of the rights and wrongs of human conduct shared my mother’s view and frowned upon the unuprighteous sentiment expressed. “A Decent Fellow Doesn’t Work”, a book well up to his habitually high standard, did not receive the support it deserved because of its, to many people, profoundly disagreeable name. Laurie was inundated with letters from incensed members of his public whose moral susceptibilities had been



outraged by the trite irresponsibility of its message, and he took some time to forget one of his few mistakes of title judgment.

But on the whole his book titles were dynamically imaginative and banged the gong of success in the precise manner he desired – "Great African Mysteries", "The Coast Of Treasure", "Where Men Still Dream", "Under A Sky Like Flame", "In The Land Of Afternoon", "So Few Are Free", to name but six of his first seventeen books written before 1957 and which broke all South African sales records. Sixteen no less enchanting titles followed in the next sixteen years, among them such resonant ones as "On Wings of Fire", "Great North Road", "Karoo", "Lords Of The Last Frontier", "I Heard The Old Men Say" and the one incorporating the name of Laurie's favourite place on earth, "Thunder On The Blaauwberg", which lifted the total sales of his books near the three-quarter-of-a-million mark.

Title choices were, however, only half his battle for book perfection, only one fork of the important two-pronged attack for ideal publication. Good titles could just as easily be ruined by inartistic, haphazardly executed jacket designs, and *vice versa*, and for most of his writing life the art-work of his books gave Laurie and his publisher the most trouble and headaches.

A jacket picture giving a true indication of a chapter or a specific incident in the

book was fundamental to honest salesmanship and had to be carefully worked out, he asserted. Less scrupulous authors and publishers were often known to approve jacket scenes having little relation to a book's actual contents, and by so doing played dishonestly on purchasers' imaginations and misled them into buying something they actually were not. Such fraudulent jackets were only shabby chicanery unworthy of reputable authors and publishers, he said, and harmed the good name of the book trade: "Take Wightman's book, 'The Wind Is Free', for example, a straight forward, wholesome story of a yacht trip across the Atlantic. But when the book was brought out in America as a paperback it appeared with a lurid cover showing a large-busted, half-naked girl slouched provocatively over a table in a sleazy waterfront dive with a gin bottle at her elbow. There was no hint of such an episode in the whole book, and people who bought it on account of the suggestive jacket must have been thoroughly fed-up at having been taken in so blatantly." Never in all his book jackets did Laurie have to resort to scenes of sex or violence as a gimmick to promote higher sales. He could without difficulty always lay his hands on the illustrations he wanted for his books from the archives or from his large private collection of photographs and photostats, but the dust covers, frontispieces and line drawings for chapter headings were vastly different and worrying matters.

He blessed the day he engaged Mrs Dorelle Humphries for the jacket treatment of

his first book, "Where Men Still Dream", for Howard Timmins in 1945. A craftswoman of the highest repute, Dorelle had done illustrative work for him when he was Magazine Editor of the "Cape Argus". He liked her as an individual and was greatly impressed with the high quality of her scraper-board and sketching technique. She was also a water-colourist and an oil painter of the first rank. And he knew instinctively that here, was the ideal illustrator for his books. Dorelle, he said repeatedly, was one of the few artists slap on his wavelength, knew exactly what was expected after he had outlined the theme of a drawing he had in mind, and had an uncanny knack of capturing precisely the right atmosphere in her artistic depiction of a chosen aspect of a book. She could always deliver the required goods on time. Except for thirteen of his thirty-three jackets which were photographic or were dust covers designed by other artists, Laurie was happy to leave the jackets of the rest of his books to the capable pens and brushes of Dorelle. Only once did she not come entirely up to standard. For "A Decent Fellow Doesn't Work" Laurie envisaged an unsophisticated bar scene in dockland with sailormen and fisher folk drinking and telling their tales at tables in a small lamp-lit bar room. Dorelle produced a lifelike colour picture faithful to Laurie's direction, but the lamp light was too dim, the bar room and its occupants too dark and indistinct for his liking or a dust cover. He paid for the picture out of his own pocket (and Dorelle was not a cut-rate artist), had it framed and hung it

alongside the other Dorelle originals of his book jackets on his bedroom walls. Dorelle returned to her drawing board and this time came up with a new jacket design which to the minds of many was one of her best.

Laurie considered his finest jacket the Dorelle colour plate for “At Daybreak For The Isles”. He was also heartily amused when this book was selected by the school authorities as a matriculation English set-work. “The opening chapter takes the reader into Black Sophie’s notorious brothel-come-lodging-house in Cape Town’s Bree Street in the eighteen hundreds,” he chortled at hearing that the book had been prescribed for school children. “Here one meets tough sailormen and women of easy virtue in the rough environment of drink and ribald carnality – hardly the type of reading for young folk. I can’t help thinking that the official who recommended this book to the school board slipped up badly with his own homework by not reading it beforehand.”

Dorelle’s jacket showed plump Black Sophie standing in the middle of her huge smoke-filled bar, presiding benignly over her crowd of seafaring customers and uninhibited young ladies, and no doubt singling out the seamen to be shanghaied after having been dosed with liberal glasses of drugged Cape brandy. One of her most realistic pieces of work for Laurie.

When Dorelle died Laurie was cast down in gloomy depression. He had lost a

dear friend and a treasured artist whom he would find wellnigh impossible to replace. "There are many artists around, I know, but most of them can really only be described as advanced amateurs," he said of his dilemma as the time in which he had to find another artist for his next book came nearer. "In this game only a high-grade professional artist will do, and there are hardly any about who can combine good drawing technique with the correct feeling for atmosphere. Most will only waste my time and theirs by doing a botched job, so I must keep on looking for a real artist who is able to come up to scratch."

He considered Tretchikoff whom he knew and whose work he admired, but concluded, rightly, that he would be too expensive. Someone recommended Leng Dixon, a well-known local artist specialising in typical South African scenes, who had drawn the end papers for Laurie's "A Decent Fellow Doesn't Work" some time back, as Dorelle's most likely successor. Laurie examined his work again, liked what he saw of Dixon's old Cape Malay quarter, District Six and Cape Town harbour scenes and induced Howard Timmins to hire him as jacket illustrator for his following four books. He and Leng immediately hit it off, and the jackets and frontispieces for "On Wings Of Fire", "Thunder On The Blaauwberg", "Almost Forgotten, Never Told" and "I Heard The Old Men Say", while not perhaps of quite the exceptionally high standard of Dorelle's, were fully up to his and Timmins' anticipations. Colourful and clear in Dixon's individually

distinctive fashion, the drawings of the thatched Cape farmhouse with pumpkins and onions hanging in the sun; bargain hunters on the Grand Parade; food and wine, and old Cape schooners alongside cracked plank jetties in the harbour, the success of these four jackets led Laurie to believe gratefully, but unfortunately prematurely, that he had once more a reliable and competent artist who had put an end to his illustration problems. But he was hit by misfortune a second time. Dixon died suddenly some months before the publication of “Full Many A Glorious Morning”, a calamity and severe setback to Laurie, and he was again where he started after the shock of Dorelle’s untimely departure.

Other artists were sought and tried but he was never wholly satisfied with their offerings. A few jackets were just adequate, no more than that, others woefully inferior or downright bad, and Laurie despaired at ever finding another artist of the calibre of Dorelle and Dixon. Singling out one of his more recent covers as an example of how a perfectly good book could be penalised by slipshod art-work, he complained that it was little wonder the book failed to be the hit it should have been seeing that it had been so brutally butchered by its badly drawn and ineffective jacket: “Book reviewers notice these things and comment on them unfavourably. This badly drawn cover had been mentioned adversely by at least one who was struck by its glaring crudity. This sort of thing is just not good enough, upsets an author and makes him wonder whether an acceptable standard

in anything is, after all, only mediocracy. I'm also disappointed in the 'A Giant In Hiding' cover; a little better than a couple of the others it still falls far short of putting across the true feeling of Wightman's lonely life in the wilderness of the lagoon. And look at that awful jacket for your 'The Weak And The Wicked'; that book would have done a damned sight better had greater care been taken with its cover planning and draftsmanship in the first place." With Laurie's outspoken criticism of my first book jacket I could only agree. For the cover of my next book, "The Sad And The Sinful", Howard Timmins and I had Leng Dixon design and draw the cover design which was a huge improvement on the previous one.

But the sad solution to Laurie's difficulties with artists and book jackets was closer than he or anyone else dreamed. The virulent cancer which was to carry him off in less than a year after the first symptom appeared had already made deep inroads when he placed the last full stop on the final page of his pen-ultimate book, "A Taste Of South-Easter". He was happy with the title and pleased with its cover of a typically windy Cape Town summer's day in old Long Street, with pedestrians blown about and the background ornamental Victorian architecture giving an air of nostalgic authenticity, when he arrived at my house with a presentation copy. There was only one flaw in the otherwise perfect drawing.

“Do you see the mistake in the jacket?” he quizzed my wife when handing her the first signed copy as was his practice with his new books a few weeks before their publication. Joan took a look and nodded hesitantly, afraid of hurting his feelings by being the first to expose a cardinal weakness. “Of course you do,” he relieved her of having to condemn the obvious inconsistency, “and so will everyone else. And I’m bound to get dozens of letters pointing it out as though I hadn’t noticed it myself. The damn South-Easter cloud is blowing the wrong way across the top of Table Mountain!”

All his book-writing career Laurie had the same problems with finding portrait photographers as he had in commissioning competent jacket cover artists.

It has sometimes been suggested that his nearly egg-like baldness was a knock to his vanity, a physical handicap that he never quite came to live with. A few days after he died I was surprised to hear the commentator of a five minute wireless broadcast to his memory tell his listeners that Laurie would never appear in public without his hat on and that he refused outright ever to be photographed bareheaded. True, but not for the reason of self-conceit at which the announcer hinted.

Laurie was never under the slightest false illusion about his personal appearance. “Good looks have never run strongly in the male members of my family,” was his



honest acceptance of what my mother fondly described as his rugged countenance saved only from out-and-out ugliness by the deep blue of his eyes. “I console myself that a handsome face is not everything in life, that I have seen far uglier men in my time, and by thinking that I am possibly improving a little in looks as I get on in years.” To all these observations I agree. He was by no means the ugliest of men and he became increasingly distinguished-looking as the passing years filled him out and sprinkled greyness on what little neutral-colour hair he had clinging around the ears.

Laurie, with his extra-sensitive skin, suffered the torments of painful sunburn whenever he exposed his face and head to the sun for more than very short periods at a time. Later in life he was to pay the price for the continual irritation of too much absorbed sunshine during his thoughtless youth, when doctors, shaking their heads and telling him that light-skinned, blue-eyed folk like himself really had no place under the hot Southern Africa sun, sliced from his forehead, ears and cheeks the angry blemishes so matter of factly called “sun-induced skin cancers”.

Creams and lotions, the latest anti-sunburn tablets, he tried them all in desperate rotation with depressingly negative results. Nothing helped. After a few minutes in the summer sun with head uncovered, his white skin reddened, blotched then

blistered ferociously, bringing ringing in his ears and nights of sleepless agony. The wide-brimmed beach hats, tropical topis and grey smart about town “Christie’s Rollaways” with which he came to be so closely identified were vitally necessary for his physical self-protection, not for the conceited concealment of his hairless scalp.

Laurie’s craggy, strangely unphotogenic face – cleft chinned, thickish-nosed, with a tendency to jowliness in later years – and the near-complete baldness which had overtaken him in comparatively early youth, presented formidable challenges to the most proficient of photographers. For head and shoulders pictures of the author on the back inside jacket flaps of his books, Laurie, sparing no expense, consulted leading camera portraitists in Cape Town and overseas, with the same disheartening outcome as his long search for anti-sunburn applications. “I’ve baffled all the professionals,” he told me with a certain disappointed pride after all the photographic possibilities had been exhausted and no one had come up with a picture he considered worthy of a jacket flap or magazine illustration. “All have operated in exactly the same way, walking round me slowly with puzzled expressions on their faces and turning my head this way and that to study the angles, adjusting the artificial lighting and then clucking and wringing their hands at the hopelessness of the task. Without a hat, impossible, my bald head reflects the light. So I put it on and they repeat the procedure before clicking away half-

heartedly with their complicated cameras. But none of these experts have been able to do a damn thing to make me appear even reasonably presentable. And in every case, in spite of heavy retouching, the finished pictures are all, as you have seen for yourself, completely unusable.”

In jest I reminded him that Karsh of Ottawa, that most celebrated photographic portrait artist famous for his studies of the world’s celebrities, was sure to have the right solution to every photographic problem. Karsh, I reminded him, had notched up a string of flattering likenesses of several well-known bald-headed sitters – Churchill, Eisenhower, Pable Casals, Picasso – and could most certainly do the same for him. Perhaps a quick trip to Canada might be worth his while ... “I know what you mean,” he laughed off my facetious suggestion, “I’ve seen some of his portraits and he’s good, but not good enough, I’m afraid. With a face like mine even Karsh would find me an impossibly tough nut to crack. I don’t, of course, require a photographer at all; what I really need is a bloody magician!” And he gave up looking for photographers who might do him justice, and resigned himself to – “The best of a lousy bunch” – an old picture in which he appears suitably hatted and urbanely decorous, for nearly all his newspaper, jacket flap and bookshop publicity.

## CHAPTER 8

### JOURNALIST AND COUNSELLOR

*He was my friend, faithful and just to me.*

William SHAKESPEARE.

During the forty-five years of our father-son association I knew Laurie for just over half that time as a working newspaperman, and the remaining years as a full-time professional author and writer of articles and short stories for leading British and American magazines such as “Blackwood’s”, “John O’ London’s”, “The Windsor”, the “Saturday Evening Post”, “Strand” and “Wide World”, which paid handsome fees for his contributions. And for the last two decades I was not only favoured with a ringside seat – to use a boxing term since his progress from the light division to the heavyweight class was a long and strenuous fight for supremacy – from which to watch his steady rise from obscurity to the top of national literary fame, but I was also as often as not right there in his corner to commiserate with him on his few defeats and celebrated with him his host of victories.

But for the first thirty years of his journalistic life, except for his brief and unhappy spell in Fleet Street before my time, Laurie spent the whole of his newspaper career on the “Cape Argus”, dividing the little spare time he had

between my mother and me, his yachting pursuits and slogging out a steady flow of articles for small returns for local magazines and newspapers as well as for overseas publications which, in those days, paid writers little better, his head filled with dreams of financial independence and early retirement from the newspaper grind.

According to those who worked with him and knew the journalistic business backwards, Laurie was a tip-top reporter who never idled away a moment of his day. Older retired members of the “Argus” staff remember his controlled excitement at noon on Mondays in pre-war times when the mailship arrived from Southampton after the seventeen-day voyage. He would be restive until his overseas mail was brought to his desk. Each letter was opened expectantly; from the envelopes would drop either cheques or rejection slips. This Monday morning routine meant to him the returns of his industry. If on these ritualistic Monday mornings a fee fell from a letter he exclaimed: “Great days! Wonderful times!” a favourite phrase of his. Should the pickings have proved lean he cried out in a mock dismal voice, “Holy mackerel!” and staggered and clutched his brow in a pantomime of tragedy.

Some of his colleagues in the reporters’ room envied his Monday morning cash inflow and resented his side-line writing achievements. He had little time for

these small people with their little jealousies and spites. He doubted if they ever paused to reflect on the secret of his regular beginning-of-the-week affluence, which was just long hours of hard work with pen and paper at his writing desk. In the days before the war few newspaper reporters earned large salaries, and Laurie with his developing sybaritic tastes which were to come to full bloom when he hit the illusive three crowns of the literary jack-pot machine had no intention of missing out when it came to the finer things of life. Many of his reporter friends liked to forget that in the evenings when they caroused and were having good times he persevered at the craft he loved. Through determined will-power he disciplined himself to the important writing tasks at hand while his chronically impecunious colleagues squandered their inadequate incomes on luxuries and indulgences they were unable to afford.

Even in the afternoons when for most reporters the day's job was done, I am told that he seldom lazed or relaxed. When others grabbed their hats or nipped out to the Cafe Royal bar across the road, he stayed seated at his desk, reached for his paste pot and long scissors and began clipping from South African and overseas magazines articles and news items on subjects he knew would be useful in the future. In this way he built up his enormous private reference library which, for as long as I knew him, was housed in filing cabinets and large cardboard cartons which filled the hallways of the small houses and flats he inhabited in the Sea

Point suburb of Cape Town. But Laurie had a photographic memory for all that he so carefully squirrelled away; although painstakingly cross-referenced it was seldom that he had to consult his index to look anything up. His old friend A. P. Cartwright, the famous historian of the gold-mining industry and biographer of Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, when they were on the “Argus” together liked to tease him and test the speed with which he could lay his hands on odd remote subjects, as one might time an Olympic runner over the hundred yards dash. “Laurie,” Cartwright would trigger his starting pistol, “I’ll bet you five bob you can’t find your file about the deadly button spider before I count to twenty, beginning now.” Laurie loved these sudden challenges and with amazing swiftness always defeated Cartwright’s wily attempts to outwit him.

Yet even in his working hours in the “Argus” office there was something abidingly enigmatic about Lawrence Green – a remoteness he sometimes carried over to his family and social life and which at times made him brusquely irritable and bad tempered. With boyish zeal he could respond to Cartwright’s light-hearted wagers and engineer harmless practical jokes on his newspaper colleagues, yet for many hours a week he would frequently shun all company and conversation in seeming illhumour with himself, the world at large and other people in particular. Seeing him bent over his desk working away at a story, his fellow reporters kept their distance knowing they could expect a gruff or off-hand

reply if he was interrupted with some triviality or commonplace comment on topics in which he had no interest. At other times kindly helpful, he was never too busy with his own literary assembly-line to listen to a friend's genuine worry or personal problem or to advise a colleague or raw reporter on the best way of tackling an assignment.

Journalistically, to his newspaper friends, he was a man who clung to many maxims. Perhaps he allowed these maxims to play too rigid a role in his life. My mother certainly thought so, and after only a few years of their intimate relationship lost all hope of ever jogging him from his rut of fixed, unbending habits. But although he was often a lone, withdrawn figure in the "Argus" editorial department, he was never the selfseeking, detached pedant. "Beware of greed and ambition," he counselled me whenever I had some grandiose plan for making money in mind, "both are killers of the spirit and can turn ordinary people into utter bastards with thoughts only for themselves and their overriding need to get ahead. The newspaper game has its fair share of these ambitious swine with duodenal ulcers and nervous complaints caused by their ceaseless high-powered activities, who make life impossible for those working with or under them. I have come across many of these viciously go-ahead gentlemen in my time in journalism, pathetic little people with hardly any writing talent, but with a remarkable aptitude for intrigue and back-biting. They are the scourge of the



newspaper profession.”

Detesting what he described as the “phonies and charlatans in the newspaper game”, and not fearing to speak up against pompous impostors in high places, there were those who knew that they had earned Laurie’s derision and contempt and not big enough to credit his gift for profitably marketing his freelance writing wares, who struck back in the only way they could – by using influence to see he did not advance as fast or as easily as he should. He knew his two-faced enemies working counter to his interests from behind the scenes, as did I, but refrained from *engagement* in their shoddy manoeuvring as being beneath his dignity. From episodes he told me more in pity than in rancour, he was, it appeared, often the hapless victim of underhand plotting and inter-office rivalries of those envious of his privately arranged success.

But even those against him were bound to admit that Laurie was an instinctive newspaperman with journalism coursing strongly through his system. The ripe plums of his profession might well have been his had he played his hand with a little cunning and cared to compete and grasp for them. Instead, often passed over for promotion and better jobs by those a good deal less experienced but more in favour, I never once heard him decry another’s advancement except perhaps with a sadly enigmatic shake of his head and a brief “My, oh my”, no matter how

unfair or ill-deserved. Ripe plums? He told me he regarded them as prickly pears to be avoided at all costs!

A competent and methodical executive, a good columnist and a fine organiser, he nevertheless wished no permanent deskbound job with an ever-bullying battery of telephones to harass him; a writer first and foremost, the silent music of the prose Laurie created was all he needed for full satisfaction of his spirit.

Though he liked to live his life to a time-table that frequently threatened to enslave him – another tendency my mother came to find irksome and complain about – he could on special occasions and when in the right frame of mind relax completely and allow no rival in spontaneous conviviality. At these times he became a charming and entertaining companion. His friend Scott Haigh remembers that sunlit Sunday in September 1939 when all South Africa listened with bated breath to Neville Chamberlain's declaration of war on Nazi Germany. He and Laurie helped produce the "Argus" special edition and later that evening drank brandy and dined in the Cafe Royal grill room nearby. At the next table were two excitedly anxious young men soothing their forebodings in alcohol. In semi-drunken tones one asked the other the burning question haunting all men of military age: "Where, I wonder, will we both be this time next year?" His companion fixed him with an alcoholic stare, wagged his finger prophetically and

in a sepulchral voice supplied the stark answer, “A year from now we’ll probably both be just bloody skeletons hanging from the Siegfried Line!” Years later Laurie could still laugh at and describe this macabre incident down to the minutest detail and mimic to perfection the voice of the lugubrious reveller!

Professionally as well as in his personal life he made a fetish of punctuality. There were never any last-minute rushes for Laurie when he was in control of a situation, these upset his digestion and brought on stomach cramps and evil moods. Everything he did was always strictly scheduled. In later life it became my pleasant duty on sailing days to fetch him and his luggage by car and transport him to the ship he was to catch for his regular trips to England and the Continent. As a gesture of good fellowship and because he liked to entertain me aboard, I always joined him to lunch in the liners’ first-class dining saloons. It was, however, imperative that I arrived at his front door at least an hour and a half before last-minute boarding time, even though the docks was only ten minutes drive away, to allay his fears of possible delays caused by flat tyres, trouble finding nearby parking, goods trains shunting back and forth over crossings and unforeseen hold-ups at customs. And woe betide me if I happened to be a few minutes late pacing the room, hurriedly collecting his bags with a dark frown upon his face, Laurie showed just how displeased he was that my unthinking tardiness had caused him anxiety and ominous rumblings of his tricky digestion.

Never a second late for meetings with friends or business associates, he resented intensely being kept waiting by others who had previously agreed on a specific meeting time and place; consultations with doctors and dentists invariably saw him sitting in waiting rooms patiently paging through out-of-date magazines a good three-quarters of an hour before his appointment.

Only once in his long years on the “Argus”, as far as his colleagues knew, did he fail to meet the newspaper deadline he observed so inexorably. He told the story wryly and often in later years. The general standard of South African hotels and service was topical at the time and he was sent by his news editor to interview George Koenig, a famous restaurateur of those times, on the subject. Koenig, a short, affable German and master of the hoteliers’ art, owned the Royal Hotel in Plein Street and the Cambridge Hotel at Milnerton. Laurie could by then discuss food, wine and restaurant comfort and efficiency on equal terms with the best of connoisseurs and was a “natural” for the interview. Koenig had scathing things to say about South African hotels which, he declared, still lingered in the “ox-wagon and biltong age”. He aired his provocative views at length over the luncheon table where he and Laurie ate specially prepared exotic dishes and lingeringly quaffed fine wines from Koenig’s ample private cellar. When Laurie finally downed his last liqueur, closed his notebook and walked out into Plein Street he was dismayed to find the street lights burning and commuters hurrying to catch their

trains. He also saw that the final edition of the “Argus”, whose deadline he had missed by some time, was already selling on the streets. His lunch with Koenig had lasted a full six hours! But the next day a penitent Laurie made up for his exceptional lapse by writing the “ox-wagon and biltong” interview in his inimitable tongue-in-cheek style which expunged the one and only blot on his long punctuality record.

Laurie’s skill as a reporter and feature writer was rooted in thoroughness. Every one of his newspaper colleagues agreed on this. When time allowed he studied in detail the subject for interview – neglect of this, he told me once after reading a fatuous newspaper interview with a renowned visiting novelist, was the most serious fault in modern journalism as new generation reporters could not be bothered to research their subjects properly beforehand and showed themselves the hacks they were by asking the most inane and superficial questions simply because they had no idea at all of the background or history – and he drafted well thought out, penetrating and to-the-point questions, the answers to which were sure to unmask impostors and chancers attempting to pull “fast ones” for personal publicity.

And Laurie could be deadly in his shrewd and blanket summings up of all those he interviewed. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War he called

for an interview on the then Lord Chief Justice of England, the late Lord Hewart, who was holidaying in Cape Town, in his mailboat suite. Hewart, who had a reputation for sagacity which did not long survive his death, impressed on Laurie for publication that anyone who imagined war with Hitler's Germany imminent was nothing but an idiot. Moving in the highest echelons of British diplomacy and in a position to know the secrets of international power politics and compromise, there were many who were completely taken in by Hewart's "from the horse's mouth" assurance. But not Laurie. He came up to my mother's house that evening for his usual 6 o'clock drink and told us scornfully of his meeting and impression of Lord Hewart: "As far as I'm concerned just a doddering old fool. The man in the street is not stupid. But the Lord Chief justice of England is! There is certain to be war." History and the bursting of the bubble of self-important Hewart's political acumen proved Laurie right.

I know that Laurie's father, the late Mr G. A. L. Green, would have liked his son as one of his assistant editors and wielded the power to arrange this if Laurie had showed willingness to co-operate. But in large business groups such as the "Argus" with interests and branches spread throughout the country like the tentacles of a giant octopus, promotion of any note usually comes only to those prepared to follow the flag and accept transfer anywhere at any time on Company terms. Having no misconceptions about this, Laurie, true to himself and his

employer, left the “Argus” in no doubt at all that he would never be prepared to uproot from Cape Town, and watched quite philosophically others set off to occupy higher posts which he himself could easily have filled. Travel he loved; the distant trails and the lights of the world’s capitals always called to him in honeyed tones. Wanderlust was his heavily indulged mistress. But to him it was unthinkable that the road home, for which every traveller eventually longs, should lead back anywhere but Cape Town, to the lonely Blaauwberg beach, the thunder of north-west gales on the rocks of the Sea Point coastline, the vanishing yet haunting old Cape Town street cries, the odd characters in obscure nooks of the city, the gracious past of a town that has belied the title of one of his finest books on the Mother City, “Grow Lovely, Growing Old”. To him all of this meant home.

Once, before he had made his views on promotion known, he was offered elevation to a higher position, the editorship of a group daily newspaper in a small up-country town. And he turned it down flat. He reported his unexpected interview with his editor and his adamant decision to penalise himself professionally with an impish twinkle in his eye to my mother and me that night over dinner at his Green Point house: “The editor’s face was a study when I informed him that I wouldn’t even think over the proposed transfer. A decent chap, he was amazed that anyone would answer no to the chance of climbing the ladder of

promotion with greater responsibility and more money. What he did not realise was that by then I was making a hell of a lot more from my books and private writing than the increased salary I would be earning in the new job and, therefore, had no need to play ball when it didn't suit me." From this time onward he, quite understandably, was at the end of a journalistic cul-de-sac in the "Argus" wide scheme of things. *Touche!*

Most commentators on Laurie's solitariness forget or do not know that this was to some measure hereditary. His father, himself a most ungregarious man who abstained from social fripperies, was happiest in his home surrounded by his family and books and pottering in the garden. It is easy for editors of large newspapers to allow themselves to be fawned upon and become socially idolised. George Green, however, abhorred schemers, social climbers and sycophants just as violently as his son did, and kept them at arm's length. Although at one time, taking an active interest in party politics and elected an M.P. (something Laurie would never have done) Green senior was at heart as shy and modestly retiring as his son.

But for a man with a trained and gifted newspaper mind, George Green could be peculiarly ambivalent in his absentmindedness. The story, probably apocryphal, is still told in the office of his mental absorption with his own affairs at the time of



the tragic Salt River railway accident in 1926. Green travelled in the suburban train which followed the evening express which crashed into the Salt River bridge. A dreadful smash, the long death roll included the judge President of the Cape, Sir Malcolm Searle. Green's train was delayed for over an hour while the wreckage and the line were cleared. Moderately annoyed at the delay but not taking the trouble to enquire its cause, Green buried himself in his newspapers and periodicals and was completely unaware of the serious derailment. He arrived home unconcernedly later to find Mrs Green distracted and brandishing a special edition of the paper of which he was editor, giving full coverage of the disaster!

Once, George Green, as editor, was required to make a presentation to a male editorial artist who was leaving for overseas and to a woman social reporter on the point of getting married. For convenience sake the two ceremonies were held at the same time. George Green with loftier things on his mind than the personal affairs of his staff, mixed up the two functions and astonished the gathering by making a kindly speech congratulating the artist and the girl reporter on their choice of each other and wishing them well on their forthcoming nuptials! Laurie would never have made such an hilarious gaffe. Though as reserved as his father, he would have carefully gathered, and become acquainted with, all the facts about the recipients well beforehand. The verifying of every tiny detail was one secret of his literary triumphs.

Laurie's reticence and pathological aversion to any form of limelight has been mentioned by many who voiced their esteem of him after his death. Yet shortly after World War II he overcame his distaste for public appearances by throwing himself, when prevailed upon, with fearless gusto and efficiency into the affairs of the South African Society of Journalists. At this time there were certain reactionary elements in the newspaper industry who regarded journalists only as clerical ciphers entitled to the meanest payment and to be deprived of any form of self-expression which did not strictly conform to the ideas of their employers. Today, of course, things have improved. The industry's management is more enlightened and journalists enjoy a far better deal than they received in the past. Injustice – especially towards the underdog who could not speak up for himself, or injustice done by an inflated humbug – always incensed Laurie, and he saw an executive position in the Society as the only way to help counter this. As its national president he, who himself was no longer dependent on a monthly salary cheque and so could talk out courageously, fought with clarity and determination for increased benefits and better conditions for all working journalists. By joining battle his motives were entirely unselfish, but to those reactionaries who for domestic political reasons tried to brake the advancement of the journalistic calling in South Africa and whom he pledged to baulk at every turn, he inevitably became the *bete noir* to be crushed by fair means or foul. But journalists, it

appears, even when championed, are rarely wholly satisfied. Disgusted at petty bickering and disunity within the Society he withdrew after a short while from its business with an honorary life presidency and a heavy heart. From this time onwards he showed no further interest in public or semi-public affairs of any sort and retreated even further into what seemed to his friends a self-chosen personal Siberia with a distinctly thick hedonic veneer.

During all this time I, of course, was growing up, was struggling through my schooling and was taking little serious notice of Laurie's occupational trials and afflictions which he confided to my mother in detail almost every day, and which she was prone to shrug-off with a long-suffering 'if you know of a better occupational hole, for God's sake go to it' attitude. No, my mother being a professional woman and never having experienced the indignity of slaving for others and jiggling to their pay-roll tunes, showed precious little sympathy with Laurie's work-a-day problems involving colleagues' personalities with which he happened to collide head on. Under the delusion that because one had a job, was paid a salary for doing it and was dependent on an employer for a living, one should be grateful no matter how uncomfortable or unpleasant the working conditions, her approach to complaints involving others' employment situations was always singularly realistic and discouraging. To Laurie – and later when I had struck out in the labour market myself – and to me she would seldom lend a

willing ear to fulminations against the injustices of high-handed bosses or carping at the harshness of vocational fates. To my mother a job was a necessary means of livelihood not to be gift-horsed merely on account of one's own infantile obduracy. The solution to all occupational discontent was finding another more congenial and acceptable job, not continual diatribes and grouching about the present one one had. To my mother it was as easy and as straight forward as that.

When Laurie left the "Argus" in 1954 to devote himself to full-time authorship she was happy for his sake as well as hers – delighted that no longer would he be under the stress of newspaper dead-lines and despotic office hours, glad at last to be released from his, to her mind, dull and unexciting editorial shop talk. The fine mahogany clock bearing the tiny silver plaque with the words: "To L. G. Green – from his Argus colleagues – 31:10:1954", which stood upon the bookshelf near his writing desk in his Sea Point flat for eighteen years after he severed his connection with newspaper work as a constant and useful reminder of his long and honourable association with journalism, now ticks away the minutes on my bedroom mantelpiece and is as cherished and as well looked after as it ever was in Laurie's day.

By 1931 he had given up his yachting interests, had sold his twenty-five footer and turned his back on the Royal Cape Yacht Club, and when my mother

purchased a small weekend cottage on the beach at Blaauwberg Strand he immediately bought the one next door and settled in for a year. He was still then on the “Argus” and commuted. When later my mother decided to invest in a small Durbanville farm Laurie, having sold his Blaauwberg property some years before, did likewise. With his measly profit from the Blaauwberg sale he acquired the adjoining six acres and had constructed the identical architecturally deformed Spanish-type cottage as ours. This was the stage of his extreme pessimism for the future, which lasted fully a year before it popped and left him as rapidly as it had come about. Concerned at the financial crash he thought inevitable, he conceived the idea that growing one’s own food and becoming self-sufficient might sooner or later be a vital factor of survival as times became harder, law and order went by the board, food became scarcer and those in the cities found themselves jobless and starving. For his gloomy predictions Laurie, during these twelve months of depressing headshaking at the way things were going, the speed at which they were moving and the awful consequences expected, came to be looked upon by members of my family as a prophet of doom against whom all contrary argument was heatedly battered down by biased and often spurious and over emotional political reasoning.

Then, having convinced himself and my bemused mother of the correctness of his prognostication of ruin, he unaccountably put all six of his acres under several

hundred fig trees! Why fig trees, was not explained. But to Laurie who had never fixed a fuse or replaced a leaky tap washer – he was a most unhandy man who said that as he worked with his brain he was not required to know such things and could afford to pay others to do his manual jobs for him – had never grown a lettuce or a cabbage in his life and had little understanding of how these were done, the theoretical satisfactions of smallholding soon lost their attraction when he discovered belatedly that his newly-planted fig trees required much and regular watering. To add to his disenchantment there was only one slow-running windmill tap on the property, labour was hard to come by in Durbanville at that time, and he lived in his Sea Point flat fifteen miles away and could only run out to “Green’s Folly”, as he wryly called it, over weekends. After eighteen months of backbreaking Sunday afternoons lugging heavy water buckets up and down his rows of fig trees-assisted by me and any male visitors who unluckily for themselves called in for tea – he sold out gratefully just before the property boom and only broke more or less even.

During this abortive agricultural experiment he began to show an interest in mushroom culture. Sending all over for brochures on mushroom cultivation which he read avidly, he then considered ways of building a special cellar to grow them for his own use and on a commercial scale in the dark. He also found relaxing outdoor exercise in collecting the wild variety which came up under the pine trees

and on the veld of his estate after the first rains.

In the early days when we were both novices at fungi picking and could not with any certainty differentiate a harmless mushroom from a deadly toadstool, this pastime gave Laurie, my mother and me a particularly nasty moment, the humour of which could only be appreciated fully afterwards. He and I went out one afternoon and filled a basket with mushrooms classified as edible in the illustrated booklet on mushroom identification he brought along. Of some we picked we were uncertain, and for the final selection Laurie leant heavily on my rusty remembrance of my university botany special course – “Dash it, man, you passed botany in your first year medical studies didn’t you? You should at least be able to tell a poisonous mushroom from a safe one” – and I tried to uphold my shaky reputation by recalling what little I had learnt in botany class some years before. Although I was doubtful of a few uncertain, Laurie, normally hypercautious about anything he ate, was sure after looking them up in his book that the mushrooms we collected were all innocuous. That evening he entertained us to dinner at a Sea Point restaurant which had recently opened. Going in, he handed the basket of mushrooms to the chef with the words, “Check these to see if they are O.K.; if they are, cook them for us and we’ll have them with our dinner.” We enjoyed our meal and ate heartily of the mushrooms which were served as a delicious side dish, clearing the platter. On leaving the restaurant

Laurie, for something to say, remarked casually to the chef, “I take it the mushrooms were all right. Nothing wrong with them, I hope?” The Italian cook shrugged in surprised Latin manner. “I don’t know nothin’ much about mushrooms and I don’t understand English so good. You say the mushrooms are O.K., go ahead and cook them, so I cook them like you say.” My mother’s medical training came at once to the fore. In horrible detail she outlined the agonising deaths we could expect if Laurie and I had included just one poisonous toadstool in the chef’s delicious concoction. We drove to Laurie’s flat in brooding silence and sat around together apprehensively for several hours, swilling brandy, imagining symptoms and ready at a second’s notice and at the merest sign to dash off to the nearest outpatient’s for stomach washouts!

Laurie enjoyed telling this story against ourselves and was amused at a similar mushroom story told in return by a friend. A family this friend knew had also gathered mushrooms in a field, cooked them but before sitting down to eat them themselves gave a plateful to their dog as a test. An hour later, as the dog had suffered no ill-effects, the family had the remainder of the mushrooms for lunch. They had hardly finished when their agitated cook-boy rushed in to inform them that the dog had been found dead in the next street. The panic-stricken family piled into the car and hared for hospital and stomach pump treatment. When they returned home from their ordeal they discovered that the dog had actually been



run over and killed by a motor-cyclist!

Laurie also told me a funny story about Durbanville which he came across while doing research on the district for a book. Shortly after the turn of the century a French firm sent a representative to South Africa to open an agency in Durban. After looking around the country this man concluded he would prefer living at the Cape than in Natal. Unknown to his superiors he set up office in the small village a few miles from Cape Town where many years later Laurie had his fig estate. Since all mail he sent to his Paris headquarters was datestamped "Durbanville" and official letters were directed to him at this address, he got away with his artful deception for several years without his Paris employers knowing anything about it!

There was, as I was growing up and Laurie was working his way to early retirement from the "Cape Argus", a steady parade of girls in my life as is perfectly natural with a young man with a healthy interest in the opposite sex. But agreeably amused as he was when on my fifteenth birthday he and my mother were sitting on the stoep and I was passing the time of day with a neighbour's attractive fourteen-year-old daughter at the front gate, my mother called out jocularly to the girl, "It's John's birthday today, you have my permission to give him a nice big kiss", whereupon the girl pertly replied, "It wouldn't be the first

time, Dr Yates-Benyon, I can tell you,” Laurie came to consider my later here-today-finished-tomorrow love affairs which fluctuated at fickle whim like the constantly changing leaf colours of the seasons, with a paternally worried air. Yes, there were many girls to lighten my more immature years, some of whom, I know, he approved of wholeheartedly, grew fond of and was grieved when I and they broke up; others, not completely his personal cup of tea, and a handful for whom he was able to arouse scant enthusiasm or any liking at all. Yet faithful to his innate politeness and tolerant and understanding of my wildly erratic emotions, he treated all with the same generously charming affability which often hid his fatherly unease at the unprofitable direction my inconsistent romantic life appeared to be taking.

As I left the twenties behind, sauntered complacently through the thirties and headed unperturbably for the middle forties without the slightest genuine intention of settling down (I was still living comfortably at home) I knew that he was in favour of me finding the right girl and yielding to the permanent state of marital bliss. He never spoke directly to me about this, but there were times I overheard him trying without much success to convince my devoted mother, who was loath to lose me, of the plain logicity of his sentiments: “Some people are cut out for being on their own. But only a few. I don’t think John’s the type and I wouldn’t like him to go through life alone as I have,” he thought only of my

future well-being. “It’s normal for a man to marry, Lulu. I wish he’d think about this seriously before it’s too late and he perhaps looks back with regret. You know as well as I that both of us would be delighted to see him happily settled with someone he loved and who would fit in well with us all.”

When at the late age of forty-six I met Joan and resolved to marry, Laurie was my cornerstone of encouraging support. And this was probably the best of all the counsel he so willingly always handed out to me. When my daughter, Kendal, came into the world his joy, he said, was overwhelming, and he at last felt utterly fulfilled. And for the remaining four years of his life he loved and indulged the little flaxen-haired creature as he would have had she been his own grandchild.

There was a time shortly after the war when I became bored and dispirited with my university education. In my second year I yearned to leave, to get out into the world once more and earn a living. On the strength of one or two poorly written but nonetheless locally published newspaper articles, a career in journalism suggested itself. And always, when at moments of indecision I looked to Laurie to make things clear and point the way, I sought his help in this instance. And as always when I asked for his assistance it was immediately forthcoming, he did not fail me now, although the advice he gave me was not exactly what I anticipated.

“No,” he said adamantly, “I would never recommend working on a newspaper to anyone. I am dead against what you propose and will do nothing whatsoever to help you into journalism. It’s a wretched life, full of drudgery, frustrations and deadend jobs. Writing is a fine spare time hobby and I will encourage you in this. But I would be most disappointed in you if you went ahead against my wishes and joined a newspaper. It would be a foolish move and one in which I will have no part.”

I thought the matter over carefully and told him I would abide by what he said. He smiled, assured me that my decision had been wise and promised me with feeling that I would never look back with self-reproach. “Newspaper jobs aren’t always what they’re sometimes cracked up to be, you know. There’s little glamour or excitement in mastering shorthand and covering magistrate’s courts and dreary municipal meetings, and this is the only work the beginner is given for the first few years. Of course there are newspapers and newspapers, some have greater prestige than others. But some are awful rags and I know several journalists who, if given the chance again, would choose some other more respectable occupation,” and he told me the following anecdote to show what he was getting at and to ease my disappointment by raising a laugh. “A short while ago in The Strand I ran across an old Cape Town colleague who had settled in England and who I hadn’t seen for years. I enquired what he was doing with

himself. ‘Working on a newspaper,’ he answered sheepishly and putting on a hang-dog expression mentioned the name of a large circulation London Sunday paper well-known for its sensationalism. ‘But, please,’ he hastened to add in a voice of pretended shame, ‘don’t say a word about this to my parents – you see, they think I’m playing the piano in a brothel!’”

## CHAPTER 9

### SOUTH AFRICAN AUTHOR

*Little do such men know – the toil, the pain,  
The daily, nightly racking of the brains,  
To range the thoughts, the matter to digest,  
To cull fit phrases, and reject the rest.*

Charles CHURCHILL.

One either likes Lawrence Green's books or one doesn't. There appears to be no neutral course in readers' opinions of his publications, no middle of the road some-I-enjoyed-others-I-did-not-care-for-as-much attitudes of fluctuating interest which so often applies to other authors who vary in style and theme of their books from publication to publication. Unlike these authors Laurie's approach was one of regular consistency, entertainingly readable or deadly dull, depending entirely upon one's personal taste in reading matter.

There were few, indeed, who loved South Africa as deeply as he did, not many who made it their business to learn to know the country and its peoples – the untracked bushveld, barren deserts, desolate coasts and bustling cities – as well as he, and came to write about it all with such sensitivity of feeling for its pulsating past, famous and infamous characters, food and wines, birds, animals and botany

and the pioneer lives and contribution of its obscure, unsung heroes. For the thousands of his readers who discovered uplift in nearly every line he wrote, and looked forward with pleasurable anticipation to his annual volumes as not to be missed addition to the increasing L. G. Green section of their libraries, there were undoubtedly many, including some of his closest friends, who found his books hard to get into and put them aside after only having read a few chapters. My mother, Laurie's most understanding and sympathetic companion over the years, had never read any of his books, not a single chapter, averring right from the start when he had his first book, "The Coast of Treasure", published in 1933 that she knew at once that what he was writing about was not the sort of stuff she would enjoy. Thrillers, crime, contemporary domestic drama, true human ordeals and mountaineering epics were more her *metier*. Never did she turn past the fly-leaves of the advance copies of his books he gave her, to see the same affectionate message he always penned in his firm, clear handwriting: "To my darling Lulu. Love always. Laurie."

My wife considered his work heavy going and decried the way he tended to spoil many of his otherwise first-rate stories by so often leaving the reader in the air at crucial moments, neglecting to conclude them to satisfaction with a follow-up or later clarification; one never knew what happened to his characters eventually after he had told an anecdote or tale, and this unfinished aspect of his writing

made his books frustrating rather than easily read and entertaining. In some ways a valid criticism. To this day my wife has never read one of Laurie's books from cover to cover although she is the first to recognise his works as true South African classics of their class. But this is the cross that every author bears. I have never particularly cared for the novels of Truman Capote, J. B. Priestly or John O'Hara, great authors who have left their stamp on the world's literature. And like these, he could not hope to please everyone. He did not really aim to. "My formula for what success I have has been to form a set style of writing about the more unusual and unknown aspects of places and people, and to stick to this. By doing so I have built up a following of those who know exactly what to expect when they buy my books," was his reply to friendly suggestions that he might do better to vary his themes from time to time and bring out different types of books occasionally. "I write only what I know about, mainly the Cape and South West Africa and those parts of Europe and South America I have seen and that really interest me.

"I have been asked why I don't expand my reading public by writing similar books about other provinces, Natal, the Eastern Province and the Transvaal. The answer is perfectly simple – I am not a specialist in these places and as I'm not looking for work I don't intend making the effort to become one now. It pays to specialise. Knowing and liking what one writes about with gratifying results on



the sales charts is rather like possessing an infallible gambling system, you know. Only a fool changes when he is on a winning streak.

“Three times only have I disregarded this rule; once when I brought out a book of short stories that didn’t sell too well, and then a short handbook on how to write for money. There was also ‘A Giant In Hiding’ which was not at all my usual type of book, and this I wrote despite certain opposition and entirely for my own personal enjoyment. Authors who deviate from their established techniques and story patterns to try out something completely different take the chance of losing loyal readers without perhaps attracting many new ones. I know a number of authors who have done this to their cost and have found it difficult later to slip back into their old image. I am not a gambler, when I bet I only do so on certainties. An author’s job is to entertain; I can only entertain others when I am entertaining myself. Writing what I want to write and about what genuinely interests me is all the entertainment I require.”

For most South African newspaper and magazine book critics he had the lowest possible disregard. “Having never written a line in their lives some of these phoneyys are quite prepared to sit in judgment over others’ work. Those who can write, write; those who can’t become literary critics. In any case, so-called literary reviews in this country are only travesties of the real thing – at best just

exercises in easy gutting, huge chunks lifted directly from the author's book to fill a couple of columns, at worst the opportunity for half-baked reviewers to try and put themselves across with high-sounding words as oh-so-bright-boys much more intelligent and knowledgeable than the author. But in America and Britain where reviewers are writers themselves and know their job, ah, then, now you're talking ...

“A lot of South African book reviewers feel bound to mention that a book of mine they are reviewing happens to be my thirty-second or thirty-third or whatever it is. Why, I just can't fathom. This inanity is quite uncalled for and never fails to nark me. I'm not trying for any dam literary records, and readers of book reviews are only concerned at knowing the value of the work the critic is supposed to be discussing. But somehow, perhaps because they are so short of original ideas, they always seem to work in this irrelevant information about the number of books I happen to have chalked up. But I'm not against all reviewers. Not at all. *Bona fide* ones who know what they're about can help an author by indicating his mistakes as guiding lines for the future. And then, of course, I can always count on glowing reviews from some of my old colleagues still working on newspapers!

“In my early days I benefited a lot from the help and guidance of my good friend Leonard Merrick, a successful and well-known British author and short story

writer. Leonard never made the mistake of openly criticising my work. Had he done so I would probably not have allowed him to read through my short stories and articles before I sent them to editors for consideration, since all of us are more sensitive to criticism than we let on and find the pulling to pieces of our work a particularly nasty pill to swallow. Merrick was much too intelligent for this. He merely threw out broad suggestions as to how he thought I could improve my work and chances of having it published; this is the right kind of constructive encouragement every beginner at the writing game needs.”

Laurie held the view that book reviews, whether good or bad, had little, if any, effect on book sales. Word of mouth was the major factor in boosting a book, not the specious claptrap so often written by junior reporters on whom a book had been foisted for review by someone higher up who could not be troubled to read it himself, and whose main object was to see their by-lines on book review pages; the personal recommendation of one reader to another and the choice of stimulating title and clever jacket cover design was all that really counted. But for all his disparaging assertions against literary critics he nevertheless studied intently what they had to say about his work, although he pretended not to care one way or another, and there was always a change in his demeanour, up or down, after he had read a review of his latest book-cheerful and good company when favourable, irritable and out of sorts if otherwise!

His writing technique has been likened in some respects to that of Ernest Hemingways – bearing the unmistakable imprint of the old newspaper reporter – shortish sentences tersely to the point, easy to read but without the poetic rhythm of the more romantically descriptive classicists. Discarding all unnecessary pedantic frills to which, he said, so many authors, especially those of bygone eras, were hopelessly addicted, he strived for simple clarity in the telling of a tale.

“Writing, like language, is only a form of communication, after all, a means of telling someone something, and as such should be as simple and as unambiguous as one can make it. There is no necessity for a writer to pad his work at the expense of reader interest as you have done here,” he instructed me when I first started writing and had asked him to run through the manuscript of an article I had written for a local publication. “This is not good writing,” he went on, taking up his pen and deftly scoring out an offending paragraph. ‘I’ll pass on the same advice I always gave young reporters and give to people keen on trying their hand at writing. Watch out for over-long sentences, don’t be afraid of using full-stops, and before you put down a word think whether there isn’t a shorter, less pretentious one that would be better. Do this and you can’t go far wrong with newspaper and magazine editors.

“Read Dickens today and one is bored to tears with the ponderous, rambling

sentences. And what about Dreiser's 'An American Tragedy'? Hailed in its time as a literary masterpiece it would, I am certain, have difficulty finding a publisher if it was written in the same style today. Modern readers have no wish to wade through huge chunks of paragraph, some of them half a page and more, unrelieved by a single full-stop. Any writing is tedious to read when the author has obscured the meaning of what he is attempting to say in a welter of superfluous words and phrases. Write like this nowadays and all your manuscripts are likely to come bouncing right back accompanied by rejection slips.

"The simpler writing is to read the more difficult it is to write. I have often struggled for half a day or more to get down only four or five paragraphs in the way I knew they should be written – clearly and to the point – paragraphs which take time and thought to write but in print take only a few minutes of easy reading. This is the great art of writing. I remember years ago when I was 'subbing' on the London 'Daily Express' an old reporter who should have known better brought me his account of a soccer match that had been played at Wembley that afternoon. And what a garbled hash of sports reporting it was! He started off by calling the ball a 'ball', in the next paragraph it inexplicably became a 'pig's skin', further on he transformed it into a 'sphere' then, finally, a 'leather globe'. Quite ridiculous and unwarranted; my blue pencil worked overtime on his affected script. No, in writing a spade should be called a spade, a ball a ball, with

no confusing euphemisms to detract from a clear understanding of what the written piece is about.”

Shortly after the Second World War when he returned from active service in the Middle East he wrote, with a canny eye on the market of amateurs attracted by the idea of earning a little extra by free-lance journalism and did not know how to set about it, the second of his a-typical, non-semi-historical books, the “Authors’ Post-War Guide”, a small but highly instructive manual published in London by Allen & Unwin, in which he lucidly expounded his prescription for the successful writing and marketing of literary manuscripts.

In the preparation of this concise and easy-to-follow handbook he had in sight those of the thousands of demobilised soldiers to whom, like himself, the return and adjustment to civilian life was something of a vexation, and who would be looking for ways to pass the time and augment their incomes. A good and worthwhile effort it should be by all the laws of demand for instructional books have sold extremely well. Instead, the book, like his volume of short stories, “The Coast of Diamonds”, published in 1937, which he unquestionably thought his worst ever effort, was one of his few real writing failures. Laurie blamed his timing. Owing to his laziness and temporarily confused state of mind he had not applied himself to this work soon enough after he handed in his military uniform

and had donned again for the first time in six years the out-of-date suits and sports clothes hanging in his wardrobe. Published when the iron of opportunity was already cooling, the “Authors’ Post-War Guide” missed by only a few vital months the flood of potential fortune he vainly tried to take.

Laurie detested typewriters and used his portable only for the quick recording of short, important letters too confidential or inconsequential for a professional typist. On these occasions he would clear his desk, with a grimace of dislike remove the cover from his seldom worked machine and beat out at speed with two fingers like the old newspaper journalist he was, the well-phrased contents of his correspondence with few typing errors. He answered all his prodigious fan mail immediately and meticulously himself, taking the mannerly view that any reader who had gone to the trouble to write to him, be it in chiding or in laudatory vein, deserved at least a courteous and intelligent reply. And he was overwhelmed by letters, many bearing unfamiliar postage stamps of far-off countries, from those who read his books and sought or proffered additional information on topics that had caught their attention or made them think. He often showed me these, a few neatly typewritten, others scrawled in near-illegible handwritings, and after his death it was my painfully saddening function to collect from his letterbox the stacks of daily letters addressed to him. These I read and answered as best I could, sending the mournful tidings to those who had obviously not heard the

radio news or had missed the newspaper coverages of his passing. Why was it Napoleon only used a commode on St Helena? Could Laurie supply the writer with the names of all the Indiamen wrecked in Table Bay between 1771 and 1788, and would he please enclose a chart on which these wrecks were accurately pinpointed? The writer's grandfather was still alive at the age of a hundred and two, possessed inside information about a mysterious murder on a lonely guano island and had actually witnessed a mass springbok migration in the Calvinia district when a boy in his 'teens. Would Laurie like to interview him? Is there a difference between the old Woodstock-made glass and the Fish Hoek variety? What is the species and origin of the South West Africa half-mens tree? Which wines go best with boiled tortoise meat and roasted porcupine. Why? When? How?

The limitless questions put to him through the postbag filled me with awe and would have severely taxed the proficiency of a combination of the best historians, geographers, botanists, naturalists, psychologists and food and drink connoisseurs, which, in fact, he was. And there were many requests for tips on writing and book publication. That nine times out of ten he was able to provide the spot-on answer and when uncertain could always direct the enquirer to where the information could be found is tribute to his huge general and specialised knowledge and phenomenal blotting-paper mind. He was, he said gratefully,



blessed with a photographic memory which had helped him enormously throughout his writing career, and he seldom had to search for anything again once he had studied it and fixed it in his head.

When writing his books he worked to strict, uninterrupted schedule from 9 to 12.30 every weekday morning – he never wrote in the afternoon, the evening or over weekends – setting down in longhand 2 000 or so carefully chosen words a session after he had finished all his research and knew precisely what he was about to write.

The actual writing of a book took no longer than eight or nine weeks; from the beginning of his research to the final typing of his manuscript, the selection of the title and illustrations, dust cover picture and the screening of the galley and page-proofs, five months at the utmost. He could, he said, easily have brought out two books a year instead of the usual one had he wanted to and if the income tax people were not disposed to take so big a bite of the royalties as to make this uneconomical and not worth his while. Instead, he always worked a year in advance, having a completed typed and bound book manuscript in hand in his filing cabinet ready for his publisher as soon as his currently on sale book had run its course. This industrious procedure had a sorrowful overtone. As Laurie lay ill in his Sea Point flat – just how ill I did not then know – he asked me to fetch his

last waiting to be published manuscript from the cabinet so that he could check a doubtful entry. The doctor called, and I later showed him the title, "When The Journey's Over". Sadly shaking his head and in six sinister heartbreaking words: "How very apt it is, too", broke it to me for the first time that my old and trusted friend was a very sick man near the end of life's adventure.

Alterations were few after he had read through his finished manuscripts. His thoughts, orderly and clear from the start ensured an almost perfect handwritten draft for typing, and all he usually found necessary to correct in the typist's copy were attributable to his minor oversights and errors. But, insistent upon clean, professional evenness of touch in his manuscripts, he was never happy when himself seated before a typewriter. The tapping of a noisy keyboard, even those of a so-called "silent" model, disrupted his concentration and train of thought and he had no feeling for or control over the smooth flow of his sentences when punching the letters. To Laurie a writer had no need for such mechanical gadgets to do his work, all he required was a reliable pen, a sheaf of writing paper and a quiet, uninterrupted atmosphere.

He wrote his manuscripts direct from painstakingly compiled notes in his steady, rounded hand, always on eight inch square unlined paper, never more than four dozen words or so to a page. Given larger paper he immediately cut it down to his

desired size and stacked it neatly near his writing hand before starting a magazine or newspaper article or continuing a chapter for a book.

I asked him why he was so fussy about the size of his working paper. “An old newspaper habit which suits me fine,” he opened his desk drawer and showed me the pile of small beige writing pads that he had made up himself. “On the ‘Argus’ I always used offcut newsprint which I obtained from the printing works for drafting my ‘copy’. I found it excellent for this and for taking down shorthand notes. Write a few words on small pages and it doesn’t matter if one makes a mistake, the whole page can simply be thrown away without entailing much additional work. If I want to add something I’ve forgotten, another sheet can easily be inserted without mucking up the whole text. There is no set rule. Writers differ in their choice of materials and the manner they plan and tackle their work. I have known those who do their best writing on any handy bits of paper while travelling on buses and trains. My way just happens to be my way.”

He disclaimed emphatically that a writer needed inspiration, merely a convenient word, he said, denoting refuge from the stringent demands of unrelenting work, and used by dilettante amateurs (never by realistic professionals) more in love with the idea of writing than with its practical application; the determination to set down a thousand words or so every day, come what may, until the book was

finished made the writers of the world, not hours wasted on the whim of mythical mental revelation: “Writing is a trade like woodworking or plumbing and just as difficult to do. The writer must assemble all his tools and materials then fit them carefully together as a master carpenter constructs a cupboard or a set of bedroom furniture.”

His spartan dictum as to what a desirable writing environment should be was Draconian in all its practicability – a desk or a table, a hard, straight-back chair to keep the writer awake and on his toes, and a blank wall view to cut down distraction – “Forget the dream of a tropical paradise with palm-fringed beaches framed in the study window, in such idyllic surroundings few people would ever write a line. There is only one way to build a book and that is by first formulating it in the mind, making aids to memory notes, deciding beforehand what one intends to say, then slogging it out paragraph by paragraph until the thing is finished. There’s no easier substitute for writing than just sitting down and doing it.”

Laurie’s books have been described as the average man’s opportunity of acquiring Africana which would in time increase in value. This is true. Pleased may they well be who regularly bought copies of his annual works and can now point to a number of his jacket spines among the books on their shelves. They

have made a wise investment. His earlier now out-of-print books, occasionally obtainable at high prices from astute dealers, were already fetching large amounts during his lifetime and more than doubled this worth after his death. “Karoo”, for instance, published as late as 1955 and selling for only fifteen shillings at the time could not be bought for under nineteen rands sixteen years later.

“As far as I know there are only two complete collections of my books in existence,” he informed me a month or two before he died. “One is mine, the other belongs to you. Many people *think* they own the lot, but they are wrong. What they forget is that the *entire* collection consists of all my books, including the one on writing, the ‘Authors’ Post-War Guide’, my selection of short stories, ‘The Coast of Diamonds’, and my London publications. The four I wrote before 1941 have been out of print for years and I doubt that many collectors or dealers have them or could lay their hands on copies now. The full collection must by this time be pretty valuable, I should say.”

But why should this be so? What of the other authors who tried the formula of the factual South African scene without in any way approaching Laurie’s immense popularity or prestige? What, in fact, made his work the greatest selling, most eagerly collected of all this type of book written and published by indigenous authors? In a letter to a newspaper a week after his death a correspondent posed

the question whether, as esteemed and famous author he was, Laurie could really be categorised as a true historian in the strictest sense. The answer is assuredly that he was, perhaps the most knowledgeable and versatile his country has so far known.

That he so effortlessly managed in his writing to bring to the ordinary man an awareness of the overlooked and lesser known aspects of South African history and culture which he skilfully interwove with unusual stories of the country's foods, people, architecture, flora and fauna and geography, was the golden key to his success. In the tenacity of his exhaustive research Laurie, in passing on to others through his books everything of human appeal he uncovered in his all-searching quests, had no peer. Contesting Henry Ford's trivial aphorism that history is at best a load of bunk, he, himself no highbrow pedagogue concerned with dusty tomes of dry accounts of impersonal chronical happenings, found it an exciting challenge when trouble was taken to tell it in an entertaining way. And this was all he set out to do.

For his thousands of readers, to many of whom it is surmised the term "history" had but grimly soulless schoolroom associations, he lit the torch of easily and pleasantly acquired erudition by bringing the word and all its musty connotations to colourful, robustuous life.

In assessing his stupendous benefaction to the recorded natural and general history of his country and his bestowal of such a massive treasure trove of diverting and entertaining literary experience to his countrymen, it is monstrously absurd that he should have been so fundamentally neglected as a national figure by his fellow Capetonians during his lifetime. But university recognition, it appears, even when reminded of deplorable oversights by far-seeing newspaper columnists, can be peculiarly diverted by the inconsistencies of its own achievement appraisements. While others, many others, far less prominent and respected for their endowments to the cause of literature, learning and humanity were feted for their smaller, less important contributions and received the accolades of honorary degrees, Laurie, for slanted reasons known only to the lettered scholars who determine the assigning of these imposing laurels, remained entirely forgotten. Unforgiven, perhaps, for his wide appeal, he paid the penalty for popularity with the masses:

That Laurie, by virtue of his shy and self-effacing nature, neither wooed nor wanted such highfaluting patronage, preferring to leave to others more officious the shallow trappings of fame, and would have been genuinely surprised and flustered had it been offered, is besides the point. Had he been approached he would, I am certain, have been pleased to graciously accept such reward for his work and altruism after having given it a little serious thought. The discrepant

fact of the matter remains, however, that never once during his long and illustrious career as his country's leading and most widely read historical writer was he asked to wear the academic robes of outstanding literary distinction. A severe indictment against the higher seats of South African learning.

That he was a prophet officially unhonoured in his own land did not seem to worry him at all. While a gratuitous academic gown and title might have eluded him, his swelling bank account from the sale of his books, and his celebrated name known in practically every South African household more than compensated for the thoughtless or deliberate snubs from prejudiced, highbrow academics.

Laurie's reticence and almost pathological aversion to any form of limelight have been mentioned by many who voiced their liking for him after his death. "Writers should be read and not seen or heard," he replied cogently when literary societies and other equally worthy institutions and service organisations begged his company at meetings. "I'm a rotten public speaker and have nothing whatsoever to tell people outside my books," he often told me in explanation when he replaced the phone receiver after having politely but firmly declined one of the scores of invitations he received to address some function or group. "It's a bad thing for writers to be seen in the flesh, usually a hell of a let down for all



concerned. Public appearances destroy that little bit of mystery which all popular authors should have – they harm the image his readers have built up in their imagination about him. I once saw a film of a John Steinbeck book in which Steinbeck himself appeared briefly in the opening sequence to introduce and say how he had come to write the story. He made a grave mistake. A most unprepossessing man, really, he would have been well advised to keep away from the cinema camera. I never enjoyed his novels quite as much as I once did after actually having seen and heard him on the screen.”

He often dined out on the following story at his own expense to illustrate how familiarity could breed contempt and how merely knowing an author could sometimes demolish any fancy illusions his readers may have come to hold about him. “An old sailing companion was once lying in his bunk on *Innisfallen* reading a yachting article in a leading boating magazine. Halfway through it struck him that the article was particularly good. He turned back to the first page to see who had written it. ‘Oh, hell,’ he said to himself, he told me afterwards, ‘Lawrence Green. I know old Laurie’, and he chucked the magazine across the cabin with the article unread and picked up a thumb-worn copy of ‘Wide World’.”

He once came near seeing his name on the cinema screen as the author of a filmed adventure epic. Afterwards he enjoyed telling how he had rubbed shoulders with

the top boys in the movie industry while they talked in terms of thousands of pounds for the purchase rights for one of his book chapters they considered filmable material. In the course of this negotiation Laurie even caught himself actually earmarking in his mind one or two minor supporting roles for some of his close friends.

A leading British film company was interested in dramatising the exciting saga of legendary Scotty Smith, an old outlaw and notorious horse thief, a huge, red-bearded ruffian of a hundred desperate exploits, the scion of a noble Scottish family, who carried out his nefarious raids over the Cape border into Bushmanland during the Hottentot war, which Laurie had researched and written up in “Lords of the Last Frontier”. The producer and the director, both in Cape Town after film location searches into Bushmanland and the Kalahari, contacted Laurie and invited him out to discuss their plans for filming.

“They were a couple of high-powered, fast-talking film executives, each with a pretty blonde secretary with the figures of movie starlets who, I suspect, cared for their basic creature comforts as well,” he relived the four-hour luxury-hotel-lounge scene. “They knew my Scotty Smith chapter from start to finish, treated me like a V.I.P., told me enthusiastically that they had already found the places they needed for filming the various episodes, and mentioned, among the names of

several virile actors, that of Errol Flynn as the sort of star they'd like to play the part of Scotty.

“We drank till midnight and they asked me casually whether for a few thousand extra quid I would be prepared to help write the scenario. I was offered fifty pounds for a ten-day option on the story while they reported back to their London studio; and the blondest of the secretaries wrote out and handed me the cheque there and then. I never heard another word from these film people! The option lapsed, as I felt it might, and I made a cool fifty pounds for doing nothing whatsoever except drink their expensive liquor. It was all most stimulating and pleasant while it lasted, but I never really deluded myself for a second with thoughts of ‘hello, Pinewood, here I come’.”

Laurie was not in reality always the distant, unapproachable person so many made him out to be. At heart he loved convivial company as much as he disliked regimentation and the organised demands of frivolous society. The pity was that through his modest and unobtrusive disposition he chose to ration himself so severely in terms of social contacts. Small talk and petty happenings generally bored him and he was never disinclined to show his gruff side to those who irritated him with trivial stupidities or pretensions, but he loved the role of raconteur – to the wearisome extent of too often holding the floor, my mother

frequently declaimed with rapidly eroding sufferance – in the small company of his intimate friends.

Over sixty years afterwards he still commented on his unhappiness when, at an early age, he was sent from Cape Town to the communal life of a boarding school far from the sea. “I loathed every second of this awful cheek-by-jowl living and it was the terrible lack of privacy that wore me down. I know now that sending me to such a place was possibly the worst thing that could have been done to me,” was his only ever really serious rebuke towards his parents on looking back on his life. “It influenced my attitude towards my fellow beings – they weren’t at all as likable or virtuous as I believed – and my wish in adulthood not to become too involved with others stems directly from my few short terms at Grahamstown. The happiest time of one’s life? My school days stand out as milestones to hideous disagreeableness. And to this day I am dead against all boarding school education.”

Twice he ran away from the distasteful regime to try and find adventure aboard some rust-flaked freighter headed for Heaven-knows-where. Turned back at gangways by wary skippers suspicious of his size and untruths, and never managing to get beyond the quays until when later in his working life he could afford a steamer ticket, the urge to escape the monotonous obligations of youthful

social conformity continued, never-the-less, unabated. He would, he proclaimed defiantly, keep on trying to escape as long as there were oceans and ships upon them bound for exciting-sounding ports. Wisely his parents brought him home where, as a day pupil at the South African College School he could at weekends slip the shackles of hateful classroom discipline and roam by himself the Cape Town waterfront, here to weave the magic carpets to freedom from the romantic threads of his sparkling imagination. In the sailing ships and luggers that have long now vanished from the trade routes, the sleek-lined passenger carriers, the evocative nose-tickling odours of tar and rope and coal smoke of the dockland he adored and from the stirring accounts of gnarled old seamen and brilliantined young stewards ashore from beat-up clippers and greyhound liners, he found the seeds of wonder and adventure which were to take root within his mind and set him on the road to best-selling authorship.

The love of the sea and sailormen rushed through Laurie's blood as undiluted as did his journalistic endowments and the need for self-expression through his writing. Too impatient to listen to or remember nonsensical jokes for the re-telling, he could, however, be amused by a funny sea-going story, especially if spiced with innocuous Jewish humour for which he was especially partial. I can visualise him now, sitting back and smiling and repeating for the hundredth time his favourite gag about the sea to close companions over an evening drink or

glass of Saturday dinner wine at my mother's long dining table. I recall his every word and gesture and hear again his bellow of laughter at the delivery of the well-known punch line: "The *Bounty* is ready to sail from Spithead. The mate runs up the deck, pokes his head in at a sky-light and shouts down to a cabin, 'Kepting! Kepting!, we've loaded the matzos, taken aboard the bagels and stowed the gefilte fish and lockshen.' 'Right,' calls Captain Bligh from below, 'then carry on and cast off, Mister Christian!'"

It was obvious that Laurie with his fame and book trade familiarity was an author whom many amateur writers sought out for perusal of their manuscripts or proposals for partnerships on a 50-50 basis, with the proposers giving him their stories they felt sure were worth telling but which they were unqualified to write themselves, and Laurie setting them down as co-author of the combination work. The first he considered a tiring imposition, except when some close friend had tried his expertise at authoring an article, short story or book, when he would be a strict and frank critic and adviser; the second he would never under any circumstances contemplate.

"The trouble with most people who are attracted by the idea of writing a book is the galling fallacy that it is so easy to do. Anyone who has done it knows as well as you and I that it is not; it's actually damned sight harder than passing some

university exams. But these conceited fools never give this a moment's thought. They look at the work of well-known authors and say to themselves that writing is simple, that they could do just as well, if not better, if they wanted to, forgetting that writing is difficult, commanding graft which challenges all an author's skill and perseverance," Laurie elaborated angrily upon his theme of egotistical aspiring writers after he had just received through the post a badly hand-written "novel" in a 25-page school child's exercise book sent for his comments by a woman he did not know and had never heard of. "I get many of these pathetic little efforts from people like this misguided optimist who are under the impression they have a story to be told, but in reality have nothing of the sort – nothing at any rate which would interest anyone beyond their own family circle and takes the minimum booklength of sixty-five thousand words to tell.

"People who buy books want *books* for their money, not ridiculous little pamphlets. Paul Gallico may get away with his slim volumes of stories under thirty-thousand words, but he is a literary artist, one among thousands. As for those who come along with offers for collaboration in joint book writing arrangements with me doing all the work and lending my name to the cover for half the royalties, I have one stock answer: 'No, be like me, if you think you have a story write it yourself and take all the money.' Not surprisingly, few of them

ever do.” After hearing this potently expressed confidence I made it my business, when the time came, to see that I at least was one who did.

For some years as a spare-time hobby I had been writing articles and stories, some middling good, others indifferent, which appeared in local magazines and newspapers and which Laurie, reading for the first time in print, would either acknowledge with a pithy: “An interesting, nicely written article by you in today’s paper, I see,” if he considered that I had done a reasonable job, or would refrain from mentioning at all when he thought I had gone wrong and could have done better – his silence told me more about the weaknesses of my journalistic endeavours than any learned lecture on the craft of writing – and I had at last reached the stage when I was seriously turning over the idea of taking time to write a book. But how, I asked myself, would Laurie react to such an ambitious undertaking? Would he see my attempt as a bumptious try at competition? I shrank from the thought of his pitying castigation at the boldness of my impetuosity.

But I had no need to fear his strictures. He, as it happened to my astonishment, had greater confidence in my writing proficiency than I had myself. I was at his flat one evening when Laurie, in expansive mood activated by a hefty cheque he had that morning received from his publisher, and effervescently extolling the



financial virtues of bestselling authorship, suddenly appeared to read my mind and abruptly switched his attention to my own comparatively miserable journalistic conquests with an unexpected: “I really don’t know why you keep wasting time with short-piece work when you have all the material for a book just crying out to be written – a book about your life in the social welfare sphere. From what you’ve told me of the peculiar cases you’ve had to deal with as a welfare officer such a book is surely not beyond you. I’m surprised that you have not written it already; I would have done so long ago had I been in your position. A book on your experiences, if written with a sense of understanding humour, could hardly fail and would bring you in a little money.”

That night, with his uplifting words ringing in my ears, I penned the opening paragraph of “The Weak and The Wicked”. Laurie did not bring up the subject of my book again. Wishing to avoid a distressing repetition of the ‘Laurie really wrote the book for him’ attitude which had soured his friendship with Wightman over Frank’s “The Wind Is Free”, neither did I, not even when the 70 000 word manuscript had been written, typed and was looking for a publisher. This was something I would do entirely on my own as an experiment, without him even being aware that it had been attempted.

The book, accepted for publication on its own merits, and my surreptitious

undertaking delighted Laurie. Like the sincere and ungrudging friend he was, he encouraged me to write the sequel which he was willing to read before being sent to the printer. He took the draft away with him, leaving me with inflated hopes of another hit, and brought it back a few days later with the only words he found necessary to congeal my abysmal catastrophe: "Quite frankly, John, I'm very disappointed. It's nothing like 'The Weak And The Wicked', it just won't do at all." And he left it at that. As far as I was concerned the Master needed to say no more. Biting my lip at my failure I tore up all 280 typewritten pages and hurled them into the bin, then, taking up my pen once more, sat down to start "The Sad And The Sinful" again from scratch!

Laurie puckishly informed interviewers who enquired that he had begun his writing career when he was nine years old and had never once looked back. He was, as it happens, not being droll in either of these statements. At the age of nine he entered an international essay competition, won it with a 50-word composition titled "A Day In The Country" and was awarded the prize of Alice Corkrane's "Down The Snow Stairs" for his youthful enterprise. He was, I think, secretly proud of his juvenile milestone for he kept the book carefully tucked away among the miscellaneous volumes on his shelves with a copy of his dissertation which his mother had lovingly copied out and pasted to the fly-leaf, until his death sixty-three years afterwards when I discovered it while moving out his books.

He told me often how he came to win it, barely managing to hide a hint of veneration in his voice when he named the dignitary who had considered his entry the best of all submitted. “The judge was the famous W. T. Stead, a great British newspaper editor and author – a leader in the literary field of his day. Less than a year later the poor chap went down with the *Titanic*, a huge loss to his country and to English writing.”

He could not remember when next he wrote for publication, other than that it was a long time afterwards when he had left the Royal Flying Corps, was a member of the “Argus” staff and had reluctantly resigned himself to a life in journalism. “As far as I can recollect my first assignment as a young reporter was to ‘cover’ the old Rosebank Show. I wrote about the fruit and vegetables on exhibit, and even though I knew very little about journalism or agricultural matters at the time, I somehow managed to satisfy the news editor with the contents of my reports. From that day onwards I found my feet and discovered that I could easily handle what I had to do more quickly than most, and this enabled me to get ahead with private work in office time.”

The highest-selling, most successful of all his books, “Tavern Of The Seas”, was written in this manner, mainly during newspaper office hours after Laurie, working with zealous rapidity to meet the deadline with an hour or two to spare, could devote a little time to his own literary aspirations, he told me with mild

complacency at his crafty use of saved leisure minutes while his slower working colleagues were still intent upon their office routines. And whereas his first book, “The Coast Of Treasure”, had given him the most satisfaction and had taken him at least two years to write, the manuscript of “Tavern Of The Seas” required a little less than three months to land up on his publisher’s desk.

“A compilation of cuttings rather than a written book,” he called “Tavern Of The Seas”. “It was the easiest book I’ve ever had to write, a paste and scissors job which was at once an all-out bestseller. In my years on the ‘Argus’ as a feature writer, magazine editor and columnist, I wrote hundreds of articles and paragraphs on Cape Town of a bygone age from what I found out myself or had been told by others. All this material I filed away until I had a bulging folder. When I had enough all I did was slap the lot together, do a little linkwriting and think of an appropriate title and jacket cover. It needed hardly any effort, yet the book has gone into edition after edition and it looks as if readers will never tire of it.”

Laurie enjoyed his fame as a writer with a mien of confusing paradox. While acknowledging a sense of deep fulfilment at his huge literary achievements, and honoured and flattered that his was a household name, he hedged his private life against all outside incursion with a prickly screen of dour and rebuffing

inaccessibility with which thwarted admirers were at a puzzled loss to come to terms. For those who wished their books signed by the author he was always most agreeable to oblige, but only when the volumes had been left at his publisher's city office where he could later write his name across the fly-leaves in his own time and without the, to him, embarrassing ordeal of meeting his readers and admirers face to face; on no account were collectors with books for signature ever welcome uninvited at his residence retreat. Disliking being recognised and made conspicuous by being pointed out in public, he would deal with those who rashly interposed upon his privacy with a calculated viciousness which ran completely counter to his soft and friendly nature. Always holding his faithful readers away at the far ends of his outstretched arms, Laurie was at most times his own worst literary public relations officer.

I remember being with him in Cape Town when we stopped to study an artistic display of his works in a bookshop window. A well-dressed man approached, stopped and addressed himself politely: "Excuse me, but you're Lawrence Green the author, aren't you?" Laurie surveyed the interloper savagely and took only a second to respond, "No, I'm not!", he answered in gruff termination of the stranger's challenging enquiry, and turning abruptly on his heel he stalked off down the road in a fit of thunderous rage. And yet I have seen him time and again, a smile of affability lighting up his face, signing autographs on slips of

dog-eared paper for children who identified him in the street, patting them on the head and asking kindly whether they would like some extra for their friends!

With his inbred horror of hurting feelings or causing grave offence which might land him in trouble, Laurie, in all his books, each page packed with collected facts and the names and deeds of others, reputable and unscrupulous, took punctilious measures to guard his finely honed sensitivities from the contents of a daily postbag bearing incommensurate admonishments for carelessly assembled and communicated attestations, or letters signed by lawyers acting for wronged and outraged reader-clients bent on legal restitution, which would disturb his equilibrium of mind. Never taking chances he checked and double-checked meticulously everything he wrote, cancelling at times, unnecessarily so his friends often thought, a first-class story he would have liked to tell for fear that some less principled and meritorious of those involved might still be living and come to light with writs to clear their questionable characters.

But he always had this danger well in hand, tripping only once, as I recall, when having published in a book a most unflattering portrait of a man he thought long dead he received a protest letter from this octogenarian still very much among us, which Laurie, under threat of legal proceedings, hastily deleted from the next edition.

“My years on newspapers taught me two important things which I have never forgotten in my writing career – the dead cannot be libelled, one may say exactly what one likes about them; and the necessity of avoiding the slightest grounds for legal action against oneself, one’s newspaper or one’s publisher. Some of my colleagues, I regret to say, have flouted the rule ‘when in doubt, leave it out’ when they’ve been carried away by stories too good to let pass. They’ve sometimes taken foolish chances which have led to awkward consequences and cost them money or their jobs. A writer should never be too careful what he says in print.”

“What about assurances that all the characters are fictitious – figments of the author’s imagination, having no basis in fact – one often sees at the beginning of some books?” I asked to clarify this point.

He shook his head. “Absolutely meaningless; not worth the paper they’re printed on. They don’t absolve the author from the law in any way at all. I doubt that many writers who use this worthless addendum realises this themselves. It happened to my old friend Hassoldt Davis in the most unlikely way. You remember Hassoldt, the plump, baldish chap I met in Cairo during the war?”

I did, indeed, remember fascinatingly dashing Davis. I would, in fact, find the distinguished American author, broadcaster, explorer and world traveller, who in

appearance bore a remarkable resemblance to Laurie, hard to forget. Hassoldt, a wartime liaison captain between the United States and Gaullist forces in the Middle East, wore a fancy Free French. Foreign Legion-type uniform which conjured up childhood visions of beleaguered Beau Geste forts and Ronald Golmanish heroics, and talked casually in passing of the writers, painters and glamorous film actresses he counted as his closest buddies. He was also a heavy drinker – a ‘two bottles of the best Irish whiskey a day man’ to which, after many years of conditioned saturation, he had worked up absolute immunity and never showed the slightest alcoholic effects.

Laurie asked him to look us up when he passed through Cape Town on his way home to the States. He did, and stayed the night. Before retiring he rocked my mother with a most unusual request. He asked for a teapot containing chips of ice. Since he drank all night as well as during the day, had done so since his nineteenth birthday, he informed us without a blush, he wanted a whisky-filled teapot beside his bed so as to easily direct the spout to his lips without the bother of groping for the light switch when he woke up periodically during the night for a sip of liquid refreshment. “It’s quite all right, it’s an old family habit. My father drank as much all his life and lasted to the age of eighty-six,” Hassoldt placated my shaken mother, “there’s no reason to think I can’t do the same and still be around at ninety.” He wasn’t. Davis died in his middle fifties, of what we never



heard. But Laurie was sure he had the correct diagnosis. It wasn't too much drinking that killed poor Hassoldt Davis – *good* alcohol never killed a soul – but drinking too much *lousy* liquor.

“Well, Hassoldt wrote a novel after the war, one of several,” Laurie continued, interrupting my brown study of Davis’ unorthodox nocturnal drinking habits, “a story with a Pacific island setting. He had as the main character a broken-down old beachcomber with a drunken disposition and a crooked dishonesty to go with it. He called him Oswald Wilson, or some such name, a fictitious one that he’d made up. You’ll never guess what happened. The book had not been out long before a real South Seas island beachcomber just like Hassoldt’s useless character and with the genuine name of Oswald Wilson turned up on the New York scene claiming he’d been defamed in the book and agitating to be paid out for being held up to ridicule! Coincidence? Perhaps. But my theory is that Hassoldt must have read about this troublesome outcast somewhere beforehand, tucked the name away in his subconscious and used it later quite unwittingly for the central figure in his book. But however it came about, Hassoldt hadn’t a legal leg to stand on and had to hand over several thousand dollars for his fantastic bit of bad luck.”

I asked Laurie if he had read Hassoldt’s novel and what he thought of it, forgetting for the moment that fiction, even when written by those he knew,

seldom held his interest for longer than the first few pages. He told me that he hadn't. "Fact," he said, "more often stranger than the best contrived fiction, is my interest. But Hassoldt also wrote some good non-fiction which I read with great enjoyment. One of his better titles was a book called 'Half Past When'.

"A highly specialised and difficult craft fiction writing is best left to those outstandingly equipped to do it – the Hemingways and Maughams and Graham Greenes. And there aren't very many writers of this standard any longer. I've tried to do it myself from time to time, but realised my limitations in this field and concentrated on the type of writing I knew I could do."

He spoke with reverence of Somerset Maugham (he irritatingly pronounced it Morn, vouchsafing this to be correct) and Graham Greene as by far the greatest short story writers and novelists of their generation, an appraisal shared by many, but with which as many disagree, and could when in a waspish mood over something that had upset him and meeting friendly contradiction to this literary assertion, defend his viewpoint with an abrasiveness of tongue which lashed to awkward silence all but the most thick-skinned who differed from his way of thinking.

He bought few novels in his later years – "The price of books has shot up well beyond their real worth and expensive fiction works once read just take up

valuable space in one's library" – but hastened to the nearest bookshop whenever a new Graham Greene was set out on the tables. He had them all, and although he disapproved of lending books on the principle that they were really never loaned but were given outright to the borrower since they were hardly ever returned, he passed on all his Graham Greenes to me after he had read them, with the firm injunction that they be given back as soon as I was finished.

"One of the very few contemporary authors who really know the game of fiction writing," he said of Graham Greene. "I have never been disappointed with any of his novels. A most accomplished craftsman in every way, wonderful technique and technical skill, a marvellous writer in the Conrad mould who ranks with Lamb and Kipling in the fascile use of English and the polished telling of a tale; an author who will still be remembered and read when most of the others of today's literary 'names' have been forgotten." To Laurie there was no other fiction writer, past or present, with the same everlasting literary qualities of author Graham Greene.

Why did a writer like Laurie with his wealth of worldly wise personal experiences and still untold anecdotal material so stubbornly postpone the writing of his autobiography year after year, decade after decade? One can only surmise that his natural reticence to any form of self-publicity and the public airing of his washing, clean, slightly soiled or otherwise, kept him from this task until, too late, the granules in his

hourglass were swiftly flowing through the narrow-waisted aperture of rapidly dissolving time. But near the end, too near the end as it turned out, I and others close to Laurie and with a small amount of influence at last persuaded him to put down in autobiographical form the impressions and thoughts and personal philosophy of a long, kaleidoscope writing and travelling lifetime. He was at first disinclined. How bold and honest should his story be? There were certain episodes and experiences that he would, surely, not be expected to bring himself to relate. He referred to Alan Moorehead's "No Room In The Ark", and referring to the passage where the author speaks of having as a youth contracted an embarrassing infection from a passing girl too liberal with her favours, shook his head at the frankness of such a disclosure. He questioned Stuart Cloete who was working on the first volume of his own personal narrative, "A Victorian Son", over pre-dinner drinks at the Mount Nelson Hotel one evening: "Just what does one hold back in an autobiography, what should be divulged; how much do you propose to tell in yours?"

"One should, I suppose, say everything," Cloete answered with a smile, "and I'm putting down at least ninety per cent of it."

Laurie had his doubts that he could be half as candid about himself. Despite my exhortations to the contrary, he settled for a modest sixty per cent and began enthusiastically to plot and plan the writing of the saga of his life. He opened up a

file for the notes on near-forgotten memories that came into his mind, and in my home as we sat over cheerful drinks and dinners, he sketched those long years of rich experiences he said he would describe, telling with excited animation of the anecdotes and subjects he intended to include.

“It will be a fairly long book,” he outlined his final major work, “and there will be a good deal of seafaring narrative – stories of cruisers and liners, whalers and trawlers, sailing ships and small yachts, and of the men who sailed in them – told from an entirely different angle from the way they have been told before, all presented from the slant of my own experience and sensations. My African travels will be re-told in a far more personal and outspoken manner; and I shall have some pretty raw material about my visits to America, Europe and the East. I will, of course, mention food and wine and the restaurants of the world that have given me so much pleasure, the good times and the hard, and shall have quite a lot to say about the people who had most to do with the shaping of my life. I will also cover my journalistic and writing career in a way I have not done previously. But I have had a very pleasant innings and there will be no serious personal grievances in my book.”

He asked me to suggest a title and I gave him one he had not heard before, a title my mother said she would use herself if she were ever to write the story of her

own life. He spoke it out loud several times, rolling the words over his tongue to hear how they sounded. Then, “Yes”, he nodded in agreement, “an obvious quotation from somewhere which I shall look up and identify when I get home. My dearest Lulu could not have chosen better. The title fits my own case perfectly. I will call my reminiscences ‘Wild With All Regret’.”

Laurie died before his autobiographical notes were more than a quarter completed. Rummaging through his desk drawers after he had passed away, I found the folder with his jottings for the opening chapter he was about to write. He mentioned my mother, what their years of close companionship had really meant to him and the empty void her death had left. He spoke with a poignancy that still brings to my throat a lump of hardness whenever I recall his heartfelt words. I have his memorandum in his neat, clear longhand written to himself before me at this very moment: “When Lulu was so very ill and I realised that she would never recover, I asked her what would become of me, an old bachelor completely on his own. You see, I could not expect John’s wife, Joan, to show the same interest in a tiresome old man, at times indisposed and unable to do much for himself. Lulu replied that I was not to worry, John would always look after me as if he were my own son. And she was right. Joan showed all the feminine sympathy and kindness that brings peace to a worried soul – I was always welcome at her home, and she brought to my flat the warm meals that she had herself prepared whenever I lay ill in

bed. She even said that I could move in to their house and live with John and her. Joan I call ‘The Little Angel of Mercy’, for this is surely what she is.

“There were times at night, after Lulu died, when I was in pain and I shook and felt my pillow wet and called out in the dark, ‘I miss my old Lulu’. Now there is a blonde, glossy-haired little girl, John and Joan’s daughter, Kendal, to bring joy to an old man like me. She has some of Lulu’s ways, especially when she beats with her tiny fists in anger on a pane of glass. She reminds me of a form of reincarnation. It is as sure and inevitable as the tides.”

Yes, near the end of his life he was a lonely, disillusioned and fearful man whose driving-chain for existence snapped the second my dear mother breathed her last in that small nursing home bed so far from the home she loved. He lived for two years afterwards, a period punctuated by two serious operations and two short trips away, and during this time he was also a mourner at the funerals of two of his greatest friends, Frank Wightman, and old “Argus” colleague and sailing companion, Henry Hope. And Laurie was completely changed at the end of these twenty-four grievously harrowing months.

## CHAPTER 10

### LULU

*The light of love, the purity of grace,  
The mind, the music breathing from her face,  
The heart whose softness harmonized the whole,  
And oh! that eye was in itself a Soul.*

Lord BYRON.

A whole book could be written about my mother. Making this affirmation I know I use a creaking banality too frequently and loosely applied *en passant* with reference to a “character” one who beggars belief and strains credulity by veering deviously from the set course of condoned social conduct – yet it is a phrase I do not fall back on lightly when Lulu springs to mind.

By any yardstick a “character” in the full nuance of the cliché – individualistic, mentally scintillating, emancipated from the dragging yoke of personality – reining restraints – my mother, in the many switchback convolutions of her lived-to-the-full life, lends herself quite naturally to the theme of a rollicking biography which, if ever written, would be a pleasureable and mirthful literary diversion. And Lulu, so prominent in Laurie’s predestination, is entitled to at least a chapter in his recorded life if only to evidence the sort of person he counted as his best





Lulu aged sixty-eight. She died four years later.

friend on earth and to whom he so freely gave his love, his tireless devotion and his fidelity, which she in such full measure returned.

They shared a lot in common – unfaltering integrity, kindness and compassion and an easy sense of humour. Each was a hard-headed realist with highly evolved, gimlet-sharp critical faculties which brooked no unsubstantiated or hearsay cullibility nonsense. They were also in many ways at the opposite ends of the broad temperament spectrum.

My mother was an unrepentant sentimentalist; he largely imperturbable and unemotional; she, often fiery, a clever business woman who increased her heritage capital through nifty property operations, never gave a hoot what others might be thinking of her or saying behind her back and went her own sweet way regardless of the criticisms of those pronouncing judgments on her actions. He, on the other hand, apart from his successful literary undertakings, was a child in business matters, lost heavily in nearly all his financial and investment transactions, and could not bear being even one pace out of step in the routine march of community sanction.

Drawn to people by her insatiable interest in the lives and motives of her fellows, Lulu liked to talk to and question strangers, her direct and sympathetically *ingenue* approach eliciting the most intimate facts from new acquaintances within

minutes of their meeting. Laurie eschewed such contacts, and when introduced to others recoiled from anything more bindingly personal than polite and general conversation. He said my mother should have been a lawyer, as, with her astounding facility for winking guarded secrets from the hearts of others she would assuredly have carried all before her at the bar as a devastating cross-examiner from which truth could not for long be hidden. I concurred through sometimes painful past experience. In all our history there had never been a single secret that Laurie and I had tried to keep that she did not by shrewd attrition soon extract once she whiffed suspicion and set her mind on confirmation.

Both were defenders of the rights of honest men, but in inordinately disparate ways. Once, when coming upon a meeting of militant bus strikers in the street, my mother, far from having blue-stockings, do-gooder inclinations, and prompted by Heaven knows what, suddenly climbed upon the tail-board of a near-by lorry and addressed the hostile crowd with an impassioned speech extolling the worthiness of the cause and appealing for the stay-out to continue until all demands were met. After a few seconds' stunned silence at such unexpected and inflaming eloquence the mob went wild and my mother was carried on the shoulders of a cheering throng of burly drivers and conductors to where I waited on the corner in an all-enveloping shroud of shamed association.

Laurie upheld her sentiments and admired her courage of convictions, but did not excuse her exhibitionism, and he growled at her preposterous impetuosity. In a similar situation he would have behaved with less haste and greater decorum, making known his views via correspondence or the Press or through officially recognised channels. Yes, mother was a fun-loving, captivating extrovert; Laurie a quiet but no less charming introvert. Yet both natures blended harmoniously, with only occasional whirlpools of disagreement to mar the meandering stream of reciprocal companionship, constancy and interdependence which found its outlet in a steady flow of mutual contentment and comfort of mind.

In the beginning, shortly after Laurie had taken up with Lulu, his mother, in her stiff Victorian manner, hesitated at countenancing and pardoning her son's liaison with a divorcée four years older. She would have liked to have seen him settled, married to someone younger without the spectre of an ex-husband in her past and a small son in her present and future.

As time raced by and he and my mother gave no sign of legalising the association or of ending it, Mrs Green's discomposure at its bogged-down continuance climaxed to maturity. Green senior, however, believed in letting his son follow the commands of his own emotions and abstained from interference by word, deed or demeanor. Taking the position for what it was he uttered no protest and,

contrary to his wife whose minimal contacts with Lulu were formally polite with a firm base of crispish frost, always conducted himself as gentlemanly amiable whenever their paths impinged.

Afterwards, when they came to know each other better and Laurie's mother bowed to the inevitable, each worked up a genuine affection and respect for the other, a two-way partiality that blossomed to majestic flower during Mrs Green's old age and the years of her slow surrender to a hateful disease, when my mother could show her real colours as a helpful and trustworthy friend.

Lulu was always amusedly deprecating about Laurie's female conquests, even those he had etched upon his tally way back in his early twenties long before he knew her. and did not particularly relish being reminded of them. And he, having not an ounce of jealousy in his make-up, could never tell how she would take a yarn in which he recollected a shadowy memory of youthful philandering.

A sometimes recounted tale concerned his short time as a young Fleet Street reporter. He saved for weeks to invite a gorgeous creature to dinner, and chose an expensive Soho restaurant to impress his guest. Bounding from the taxi he opened the door for his ravishing companion with a gallant flourish, in his excitement sagged his supporting arm at the last moment as she alighted, and the beauty sprawled headlong on the pavement, losing her new Paris model hat in the gutter

and ripping her stockings on the sidewalk grit. The dinner date was over before it began. In speechless huff the outraged victim tottered back into the cab and was driven off at speed without so much as a wave or word of farewell. Laurie never saw or heard from her again.

Thirty years afterwards when he and Lulu were in London and in the area she asked him to show her the scene of the lamentable mishap. In the road outside the restaurant, which was still in business after this lapse of time, with the doorman looking on in wonder, she made him point out the exact spot of the girl's collapse and his own quick fall from grace. Then, thinking nothing of starring in a public performance, Lulu brought bustling Greek Street to a standstill by going down on hands and knees and pretending to kiss the offending pavingstone in a gesture of spirited gratitude!

They were in London together five times after this, my mother taking flat accommodation in Piccadilly or Marleybone, Laurie preferring the service and convenience of good hotels close by. The reason for this splitting of residential forces was due entirely to Lulu's outright rejection of the importance of the luncheon ritual and her quaint procedure for providing mid-day nourishment. While she would cheerfully spend a hundred pounds or so here and there in the jewellery, dress and perfume shops in Hatton Garden, Regent Street and Shaftes-

bury Avenue without turning a hair, and made substantial donations to charity and hand-outs to whining dead-beats, she harboured an established antipathy to paying out money for restaurant food below the quality of the dishes she could easily whip up in her hotel bedrooms with no trouble at all.

Never without her small portable meta-fuel burner when travelling, she always managed to beguile Laurie and me to forego our lunch-time restaurant habits in favour of her own clandestine bed-and-bathroom epicurian creations whenever we all happened to be in a foreign city and at an hotel at the same time. It was astonishing what she could turn out in the way of hot three-course lunches on that little folding stove from the contents of the bulky parcels of commestible ingredients she smuggled in past the splendidly uniformed hall porters of the swish hostelrys of England and the Continent. And soups, roasts, fries and fancy sweets were all within her extraordinary culinary range.

We enjoyed these tasty and satisfying offerings, but Laurie murmured constantly against the venue and secrecy of their preparation. Nervous at our ignomy should Lulu's eccentric practice be discovered by the hotel managements concerned, he used all his powers of suggestion to persuade her that she would be far more at home in a proper kitchen of her own in which to carry out the catering art. She took the hook, and from then on rejoiced in her domestic freedom in centrally

situated London apartments with electric stoves, ovens and adequate wash-up facilities laid on.

Her other rococo food-connected custom often caused Laurie and me to colour in embarrassment, and in this she indulged with habitual predictability whenever he or I entertained her out to a restaurant dinner at home in Cape Town – an instinctive characteristic, I might add, which my four-year-old daughter seems to have acquired as an inherited legacy from her fascinating grandmother! A very small eater, my mother nearly always ordered the largest medium-rare steak on the menu, sliced the meat in two, halved the accompanying vegetables and in full view of the waiters, *maitre d'hotel* and other diners, wrapped a whole half-portion in a paper serviette and popped the bundle into a large compartment of her capacious crocodile-skin handbag for the house-boys next day lunch. And James was probably the only Bantu servant in the whole of Sea Point who dined regularly off *filet de boeuf bouquetiere*, *carottes a la Vichy*, *petit pois frais* and *pommes de terre Parzsiennne*! Highly educated, profoundly cultured, with above usual piano and violin accomplishments, a discerning lover of poetry and the classics as well as of contemporary literature, Lulu was inordinately well-read, far more so than Laurie whose reading capacity ran in selected furrows determined by his own research and writing intentions. There was little of any note that had ever been written (except for Lawrence Green's works), he and I knew, that she



had not devoured and digested with the finesse of a gifted critic and the piercing omniscience of a knowledgeable academician. Where she found the time I just can't say.

She was, as well, a Latin, French and Spanish scholar ideally versed in the writing skill, like Laurie a language purist to whom the pretentious words and flashy phrases of modern verbal and written communication fell discordantly on the senses. In the mid nineteen-thirties to satisfy her interest in writing and medicine she combined both by becoming the medical columnist for a Cape Town morning newspaper under the appropriate *nom de-guerre* "The Woman Doctor". This had amusing consequences.

In addition to the full-page popular medical articles she was required to turn out for the week-end magazine supplements it was her function to answer in her column or by private letter all medical and health queries put to her by readers through the post – a delicate and time-consuming exercise. Laurie, as a trick, induced his friends to write in regularly under assumed names, listing in gory detail the most obscene ailments they allegedly suffered, and requesting frank replies to a startling array of lewdly suggestive medical questions which, since it was never certain which letters were hoaxes and which genuine all had to be attended to and answered in the same expeditious manner, taxed to the limit her

diagnostic and remedial wisdom, journalistic resourcefulness and patience.

But she bided her time, awaited her opportunity and paid him back in full for his duplicity four years later when we all travelled to India together.

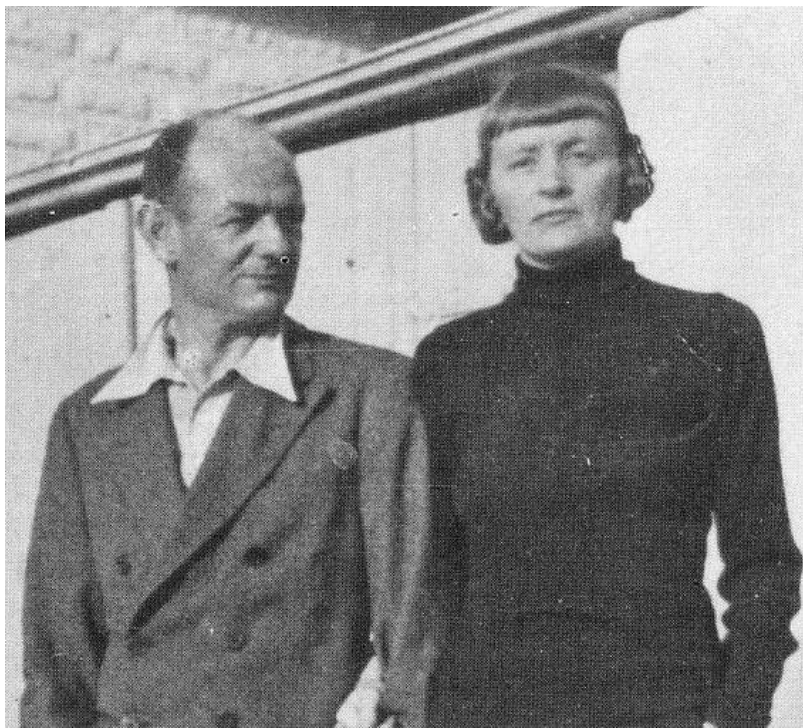
Laurie organised a short trip to the interior, leaving my mother and me in Calcutta where he was to join us at the Great Eastern Hotel on his return. While he was away Lulu engaged an itinerant tout to give credibility to the joke she wished to play – an effective machination which more than evened the practical japse score. With the tout's assistance we packed our luggage, settled the bill and left the hotel for another in a different part of town.

Laurie arrived back and on being informed by the impassive desk-clerk that a Hindu of evil appearance in a filthy *dhoti* had fetched us away and had not said where we were going, flew into a panic. Alarming ideas of thugs, murderers and kidnappers rushed into his imagination. He made enquiries, scoured the most likely places in the city then went to the police who said they would investigate. Hours later he received a creased and dirty envelope containing a grime-stained note which read in block capitals: "If you require news of the *memsahib* doctor and her son be at the Hyderabad Cafe near the Jain Temple at eight o'clock tonight. It is important that you come alone." The address was in a tough and slummy quarter notorious for its lawlessness.

Flustered Laurie, wrought by desperation after a worried day of futile searching, was at the cafe dead on time, and looked about in fearful apprehension, only to see us languidly sipping tea and greeting his arrival with feigned indifference: “Well, now, stranger, just fancy meeting you here”!

We loved our Lulu, Laurie and I, and thought her indestructible. She would, we knew, with imbecile self-deception, somehow carry on for ever. Lulu mortal like us all? With such vivacity and staunchly conscientised faithfulness, such sovereign intellect and rectitude, such magnitude of joyful purpose? Utterly impossible. We simply could not visualise our lives without her.

So hold down fast the present gladdening page, for having once been turned and the final chapter at last begun it is but fate to come upon the end.



Laurie and Lulu at Blaauwberg Strand in the early 1930's

## CHAPTER 11

### THE FINAL CHAPTER

*Yet a few chapters more, and then the last:  
after which, behold Finis itself come to an end,  
and the Infinite begun.*

William THACKERAY

My mother, Laurie's life's companion, the person he adored with warm, abiding reverence above all others during his solitary, sometimes bitter years of struggle to the peak of South African literary fame, began in 1969 to lose her health and vivacious disposition and complained increasingly of recurring stabbing pains which caused her loss of sleep and all too frequent recourse to the ever-present morphia bottle when, in the still of midnight hours, the agony of encroaching malignancy became unbearably acute.

A qualified medical practitioner herself, a woman of realistic intelligence and rare philosophical fortitude, she, like Laurie and I with our fairly extensive layman's knowledge of pernicious symptomatology gleaned from many years of close propinquity with her medical studies and career, could only fear a grimly evil diagnosis which, when it came, cushioned only to the slightest of degrees our half-expected but unwillingly accepted shock at the surgeon's dashing of our

fervent hopes: “Terminal stomach cancer. There is nothing more anyone can do.”

In the dragging weeks that followed, as my courageous mother wrestled with her bodily and mental torment in that narrow hospital bed waiting for the end, Laurie’s comforting presence was at her side for every second of the all too short visiting hours, having come, as he always did, with ice cold jugs of sweet fresh orange juice to assuage her raging thirst, squeezed lovingly by his own hands less than half an hour before in his tiny Sea Point kitchen where, in happier, less sad and stressful times, he had so often prepared for her the simple supper dishes which were her delight.

Once my mother with a flush of imminent premonition asked me to stay a moment longer after the visitor’s bell had sounded and Laurie and the few others of her callers had left her for the night. “I am shortly going to die, my darling son,” she grasped my hand and smiled a faint apology at having to depart from me so soon. “You will grieve for me, I know, but you have Joan to love and care for you, and you must try not to take my death too badly. I have only one regret at going, that I will be leaving the three I love best in the world behind – you, my little Kendal and dear Uncle Laurie.

“And you must promise me one thing before I leave you for ever,” she gripped my hand more tightly as if afraid that by relaxing her hold she might slip too soon

from those she loved and knew would miss her. “Promise that when I am no longer here you will always care for my old Laurie, that you will never desert him no matter what should happen in your life or his. You have a wife, a home and my lovely grand-daughter to bring you joy and happiness; sweet old Laurie who has been so kind and good to me will have no one else to turn to when once my voice is still.”

Her words, softly spoken against the pain of parting and of physical discomfort, rang in my ears with a simple variation of the sincere intensity of Christ’s according to the Gospel of St John: “Laurie, behold thy son; John, behold thy father.” A few hours later Laurie and I and my Aunt Dolly Wicht watched her quietly fade away.

“Is it really over, John?” Laurie asked numbly when the attendant nurse had signalled for him and me the end of a magnificent era and had left us to our grief.

“Yes, Uncle Laurie, it is now all over.” We went out to the sunlit stoep, my trembling fingers fumbling with the opening of a cigarette packet. “God, old boy,” he said, his tear-filled eyes fixed unseeing over the roofs and chimneys of the city to the blue sparkle of Table Bay and the limitless horizon beyond, “how I wish that I still smoked.” He did not say another word – he did not have to. Turning away he walked off blindly, head erect, shoulders back, to the hospital

car park for the last time. I watched him drive off through the gates, his body hunched in misery, looking straight ahead, wanting for the time being only to be alone with his inconsolable sadness. Darby had, indeed, lost his precious Joan.

We saw a lot of Laurie in the saddened months to come, phoned him once or twice a day and dined with him two nights a week while he gathered the threads of his shattered life and applied himself to writing "When The Journey's Over." Christmas with its dreaded air of gaiety approached. He knew that he was welcome to spend the abhorrent festive days quietly at our little family gathering at the get-away-from-it-all cottage my mother had left me on the beach at Blaauwberg Strand. I thought that he would seize the chance and was disappointed when he didn't. Attracted and touched as he was by the repeated invitation he could not, he said in sorrow, face the first Cape Town Christmas in over twenty-five years without his dearest Lulu. He had to get away to think about the future entirely on his own. Despite my pleas to stay with us who loved and wanted him, he made plans for a melancholy ship voyage to winter-time Trieste with calls at Barcelona and Venice on the way.

From first to last this decision was an ill-conceived and possibly unnecessarily fatal one.

His letters with their Spanish and Italian stamps were lacking in the descriptive



*joie de vive* of the many he had so often posted during his years of happier travel when his loving Lulu was at home in Cape Town waiting to receive and answer them. To be sure, he told as usual of the restaurants and the bars and bistros he had discovered, enclosing as he always did the menus pencil-ticked against the wines and dishes he had sampled, and of the people and scenes that had impressed themselves upon his mind, but the between the lines reading of his shorter than expected communications told me all I had despairingly envisaged. Laurie was obviously lonely and dispirited and longed for those who knew and understood him.

But worse was still in store. Ever since I had known him, Laurie had low down on his right calf a small brown mole no larger than a five cent piece which darkened imperceptibly as he grew older – a tiny blotch of coloured pigmentation dismissed by him for its apparent triviality. My mother with her practical medical eye had never liked the look of this harmlessappearing blemish and cautioned him repeatedly to watch out for the slightest change in the structure of its formation. It could, she sombrely announced, flare up and require instant surgical removal for the saving of his life should sudden variation in its cellular construction denote the onset of a cancerous condition. Her warning was to become distressingly true.

Laurie wrote from Barcelona that the mole was giving trouble – had bled and

slightly changed its shape – a letter which filled me with foreboding and prompted me to send a cable pressing for his immediate return. But he, lulled into a sense of false medical security, wrote back in satisfaction from the next port or call: “I have shown my mole to a doctor on board who laughed my fears to scorn and made me feel a little foolish at my panic. ‘Nothing to be in the least concerned about,’ he told me after he had seen the blemish, only a benign discolouration of the skin, not worth a second’s further thought or worry.’ I am very much set at ease by this diagnosis and I will now continue on to Venice and Trieste as planned.” With his irresponsible diagnosis the pooh-poohing physician probably sentenced Lawrence Green to sure, untimely death.

He dined with me at home the night of his return – subdued and not at all his usual exuberantly talkative self after his previous homecomings from past mentally stimulating trips. Before he left he shyly rolled up his trouser leg to show me what was there and on his mind, and I recoiled at the black and angry changed appearance of the formerly innocuous looking lesion. At my insistence he agreed to waste no further time, to consult a reliable skin specialist first thing next morning.

Laurie had only to uncover his leg in the surgery for the doctor to realise that a close and detailed inspection was not required for a gloomy, accurate diagnosis.

“Good Lord, man,” his briefest glance provoked a cry of professional dismay, “what made you wait so long to have this thing attended to? With that deterioration you should have been advised to fly right back from Europe for treatment without delay. I’ll not mislead you as to its seriousness. It is extremely nasty, a matter of life or death. With a mole like that it’s not weeks or even days that count, but hours and minutes. For all I know it may already be too late. I’ll make arrangements for an immediate operation.”

Laurie had most of his calf removed and plastic surgery to conceal the raw, unsightly scar – the first time in his life he had undergone major surgery – and missed his loving Lulu more than ever during this cheerless, unforeseen setback which he bore with patience and brave and cheerful stoicism. He prayed with composed and hopeful confidence, as did his friends, that all would turn out well, that the course of the marauding infection had been blocked before its savage spread. But the pathologist was not as sanguine. “A melanoma,” he told me privately after his analysis, “the most virulent and dangerous of all the cancers of the skin. To be honest, a very grave prognosis. We have done our best, now only time will tell whether its been caught in time.”

“And if it hasn’t ... ?” I left the question unfinished on my dry and quivering lips. The doctor’s answer was starkly blunt “If we have not been successful in

eradicating it completely, I'm afraid that Mr Green has no more than a year or so to live."

During his slow convalescence he improved in health and spirits. Steadily regaining the appetite and weight and zest for living he had lost while in the nursing home he set to work with renewed energy putting the finishing touches to "When The Journey's Over", then turned his enthusiastic attention to assembling his notes and pictures for the writing of his long overdue and eagerly-awaited autobiography. But the killer disease had already infiltrated far into his bloodstream to attack the vital organs. Glands appeared in his groin – a dismal portent which his worried doctors tried their best to keep from him – and Laurie, clinging on courageously to life, submitted for the second time within the space of a few months to the probing of the surgeon's scalpel.

We walked together four weeks afterwards, ambling leisurely up the hard, low-tide Blaauwberg beach to Eerste Klip, that quiet and peaceful route that we both knew so well and which had brought contentment to his troubled mind in past times of unhappiness and crisis, Laurie breathing in the clean, fresh sea air and limping slightly from his not quite healed operation wound and talking of far less anguished days gone by and of his dreams and fears.

"I'd like to live a few years longer, there is still such a lot I wish to do," he voiced

his apprehension about the days ahead. “But I’m so dreadfully afraid of becoming old and ill with no one to look after me. Afraid, afraid ...”

I said that he could rid himself of this anxiety, that he would live with us, that Joan and I had already planned his move into our guest room with its private bath and entrance where he could be free to come and go and lead his own unfettered life just as he pleased yet still have those he loved about him, at any time he cared. He smiled his relieved thankfulness and placed his hand upon my shoulder in affection at the prospect of a new and companionable home where he would never again want care or company. “John, old chap, you have brought great joy and solace to the heavy heart of a sick and tired old man. Lulu assured me that I could count on you and you have not let me or your dear mother down. You have been a true and thoughtful friend to me – the best that I have. I look forward to moving in with you and Joan as soon as the time is right for me to leave my flat and cease the domestic battle on my own.

“But perhaps I do not have much time left, and first of all I’d like one last voyage to England on the good old Windsor Castle. This will be my farewell to my life of travel and I mean to do it soon and in some style – the most expensive cabin on the ship, the best restaurants London has produced and a week or two at a smart West End hotel, the Ritz, the Piccadilly or Claridges. Money is no object, I’ll end

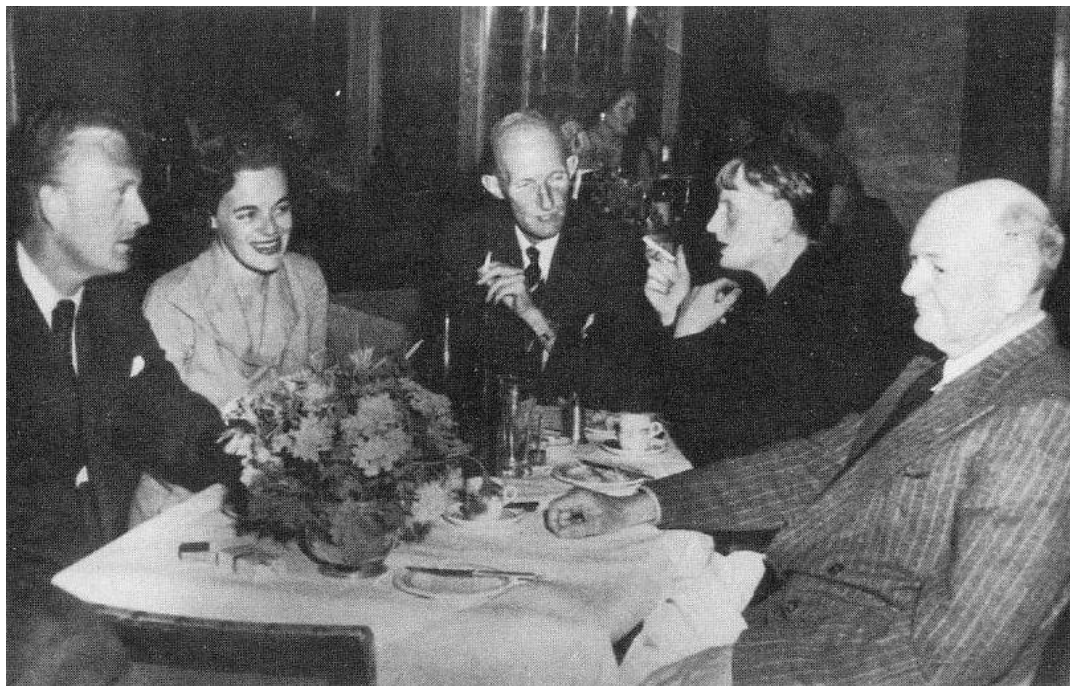
my years of wandering in a blaze of spending glory and have no intention of stinting myself in any way.”

In his last delighted letter on the impressive crested paper of a famous Mayfair hotel the day before he sailed for home, he said that he'd enjoyed his London stay as he had seldom done in the past: “My illness is, naturally, always on my mind. Will it suddenly blow up and be the end of me? Who can tell? But I have tried to forget my health troubles in a round of luxurious living, and when one is not at all concerned with the cost I find this does not require too much effort. I have seen all the recommended shows in town, have looked up one or two old friends who I'm unlikely to meet again, and have returned to many of the top restaurants, including Rules, Leoni's and Simpson's in the Strand, that have always done me so well in the past. I have had six weeks of soft and sybaritic living and have pandered to every costly whim of my grossly extravagant nature. I have spared no expense in looking after myself. Last night a final dinner by myself at the Savoy grill, the first time I had been inside this gracious Strand hotel since a fabulous lunch with friends in 1934. A magnificent dining experience” – then characteristically – “Fresh Scotch salmon, succulent, mouth-watering grouse with all the trimmings and crisp green vegetables, *baba au rhum*, biscuits and Stilton and a vintage bottle of fine St Emilion, all beautifully served in a restful atmosphere that suited me to the ground. These experienced hoteliers certainly know how a

restaurant *should* be run. The bill, £16! But I would gladly pay this much again; it was worth every penny for such a meal without the usual aftermath of shocking indigestion.”

Back home in Cape Town Laurie, looking fit and rested, called on his physician for a routine check. “Everything appears satisfactory, I’m grateful to say,” he reported with relief after the exhaustive examination. “There’s been no further spread or outbreak as far as the doctor can tell; he thinks that after this lapse of time I might just have got away with it.”

He began to make preparations for his move to my home high on a hill overlooking the great sweep of Atlantic swells and the constant line of shipping passing far below the bedroom windows – long, low petrol tankers loaded to the plimsol lines, plodding slowly homewards from the Gulf; multidecked passenger liners with gaily coloured mainmast bunting tautly streamlined aft and frothing white bones of full-ahead telegraphs between their teeth, racing the chronometer to keep their strict E.T.A. schedules; rust-flaked trawler fleets and high-nosed mocking ‘tollies’ jockeying for position for the Agulhas fishing banks and richly rewarding ocean harvests; fussily officious tug-boats churning up the sea behind and bragging of their driving power with air-polluting streamers of thick, black smoke-the view that he never tired of and liked the best of any.



Laurie (on the right) in his favourite role of dinner host, with pensive Lulu next to him, and the author opposite. Cape Town 1957.



“Everyone should have something to strive for and look forward to in life, whether it is writing a book or newspaper article he’d like to see in print, a trip away from home or merely a change of occupational routine,” he told me of his simple recipe for contented survival. “By this I don’t mean sheer ambition to get ahead; this is only a destroyer of integrity and the rot of human values. But expectations of some sort, even though these may be small and unimportant to others, are necessary for easing one’s way through the hard and confusing business of living to the full. Life is beset with disappointments, but these are part of the game and all in all the small successes usually outweigh the failures, I have discovered.

“Take away pleasant anticipation and life becomes a tedious habit from which there is no escape. After my recent share of hospitals and illness I now have something to look forward to again – good health, I trust, for the foreseeable future, a haven with you and Joan in the comfort of your house and the opportunity to settle down and write my life story in a calm and optimistic frame of mind.”

But his full and active life fast approached its final, mournful ebb. A month before his intended arrival at the small but airy guest flatlet Joan and I had made ready as his new and welcome home, Laurie, for the first time since his last

cheering medical examination, felt the agonizing pain of unconstrained malignancy deep within his lower jaw. He took to his bed, convinced against all the odds that this was but a passing indisposition, a minor virus infection which would disappear with rest and antibiotics, and spoke of getting well again and of the overlooked experiences and stories that flashed across his thoughts for inclusion in his never to be written book of memories.

And as I sat with him during these, the early stages of his illness before his brain became confused and his mind began to wander, he liked to tell again of his younger days and of his struggle to make his mark and become established. “Even with my newspaper experience it took me years to reach the top and independence as an author, and I started at a youngish age,” he let his memory rove the past. “And yet my sister in England, Rosemary Weir, only started to write when she was nearly fifty and immediately hit the jackpot in England and America with her children’s books, without any training at all. She is now a well-known and highly paid authoress in her own right and has done nearly as well as I have in under half the time – truly amazing!

“I’m sure the will to write is determined to a large extent by heredity, a special gene with ‘writer’ stamped on it, which is passed on through the generations. Two of my uncles were successful and widely-read novelists in their day and my father

wrote a book of reminiscences after he retired as an editor, so writing's in the family blood and my sister and I probably inherited the strong desire right down along the line."

He told me in that darkened room that he never considered himself a great writer, only an adequate entertainer (which was all he really wished to be) who would possibly have made a lot more money than he had from his writing had he been born and lived and worked in Australia or America and had written the same type of books but with Australian or American themes and settings.

"I've done a great deal better than most South African writers," he let his tired eyes wander to the two long rows of his books set neatly in order of their publication dates behind his simple, unpretentious desk. "My books have sold in the region of three-quarters of a million copies, but for a writer to really make the big time and cash in from his work he needs a huge population of readers to aim at. There are just not enough people in South Africa to keep a writer as a full-time author – of these only a small proportion are readers, anyway, and even fewer actually *buy* books.

"Here, if a book sells four or five thousand copies it's considered to have sold well – ludicrous really – but in England, America and even Australia an established author can expect his books to sell at least ten times as much as this.

But overseas it is a lot more difficult to make the grade as there are so many good writers fighting for recognition, and because of the fantastically high payments the competition is, of course, absolutely cut-throat.

“When I was knocking about the States in the early ‘thirties I became friendly with a chap whose father ran ‘The Wall Street journal’. I was offered a job on the paper, but I could then not see myself living and working in New York. I often wonder how I would have got along had I accepted – I might by now have been as famous as Hemingway or Steinbeck; on the other hand I might never have written any books at all.

“While I was being shown over ‘The Saturday Evening Post’ office in Philadelphia the editor was returning the manuscript of a short story to an unsuccessful contributor. ‘Do you know who the writer is?,’ he asked me. ‘It’s Damon Runyon. His story is just not good enough so I am sending it back. You’d be surprised at the number of well-known writers whose work is rejected – here in America it’s not names that count, only high-quality work – and the best of authors often fall down’.

“No, in South Africa the general standard of writing and the competition is a good deal lower writers who would get nowhere overseas have a much better chance of ringing the bell here – and I have never bluffed myself that this has not been

greatly in my favour in what success I might have had in the writing game.”

Despondent at the rapid onset of his creeping bodily distress and fearful for the result, his good and loyal friends were there to rally round and help – publisher Howard Timmins with assistance whenever he was needed; Wilfred Copenhagen with his fund of moral-boosting anecdotes to cheer his old friend up; Laurie’s sister, Rita, herself marked for early death by an incurable malady; his niece and nephew, Jennifer and Christopher; indispensable Scott and Enid Haigh; author Conrad Lighton, a trusted newspaper colleague from the far off “Argus” days; saintly Sonny and Ina Thomas who brought him home-cooked meals and encouraged him to eat a little, and writer, Hein Wicht, the companion who had shared so many of his sailing joys and bushland explorations over the years beyond recall, who flew down from his home in Zululand to pay his last respects to one with whom his own venturesome life had been so closely linked.

But Laurie, as the blood contamination increased its fatal hold upon his lungs and brain and throat, sank in strength and resolution to continue the fight. “The tide is going out fast, old boy, and I am soon to cross the bar,” he took my hand in his when told in fairness to himself that hope had been abandoned, “and I can only now be resigned with bravery to my fate. You must be sure all my affairs are in order, that nothing has been left undone. I would like to be cremated and I look to

you to see that this is carried out. There will be no sad farewells between us, for we shall meet again some day, I know. From now on, during the little time I may have left, I would prefer that what has just been said will not be spoken of again, that dying will not again be mentioned.”

He wished to die in peace, he said, without being moved to a nursing home or hospital, to pass away among his friends in his Sea Point flat with its unrivalled vista across the bluegreen bay, surrounded by the things he knew and loved – the books and pictures that were his inspirations and the hard-won fruits of a long and actively productive life, the furniture and knick-knacks passed from honoured parents down to a devoted son – and those of us who cared and understood consented to his wish.

A day and night nurse came to attend to helpless Laurie’s needs and comfort as he weakened through the slowly moving, pain-and-drugged-filled weeks towards his final lonely expedition. One rain-lashed Sunday evening in May of 1972, to the peeling of distant church bells borne upon the driving winter wind and the angry boom of breakers smashing on the rocks across the way, he breathed a long last sigh and left us all forever.

I sent the nurse away. Laurie and I were alone in the room where he had lived and worked and which so often had resounded to our happy laughter at the telling of

his tales – father and son in all but the sap of kinship in our veins. I drew back the sheet and looked upon the relaxed and peaceful features from which, erased at once by death, the ravages of time had vanished like the good days of yesteryear, and placed my hand upon his cold and unlined brow.

Across the blurring mists of memory I heard the plaintive echo of a steamship siren, and I saw him then, as I had often seen him from the quay, waving from the starboard rail and smiling down that all was well before the liner pulled away and headed on its calm, untroubled course.

“Goodbye, old friend,” I stooped and gently touched the sleeping eyelids. “And thanks again for everything. May you travel fast and safely to the harbour of contented dreams to find your Lulu waiting when the journey’s over.”

## APPENDIX

### Books by Lawrence GREEN

#### Published in England:

#### Publisher

1933 The Coast of Treasure	Putnam
1935 Great African Mysteries	Stanley Paul
1936 Secret Africa	Stanley Paul
1937 The Coast of Diamonds	Stanley Paul
1938 Strange Africa	Stanley Paul
1940 Old Africa Untamed	Stanley Paul

#### Published in South Africa:

1945 Where Men Still Dream	Timmins
1946 So Few are Free	Timmins
1947 Tavern of the Seas	Timmins
1948 To The River's End	Timmins
1949 In The Land of Afternoon	Timmins
1950 At Daybreak for the Isles	Timmins
1951 Grow Lovely, Growing Old	Timmins
1953 Lords of the Last Frontier	Timmins
1954 Under a Sky Like Flame	Timmins
1955 Karoo	Timmins



1956 There's a Secret Hid Away	Timmins
1957 Beyond the City Lights	Timmins
1958 South African Beachcomber	Timmins
1959 These Wonders to Behold	Timmins
1960 Eight Bells at Salamander	Timmins
1961 Great North Road	Timmins
1962 Something Rich and Strange	Timmins
1963 A Decent Fellow Doesn't Work	Timmins
1964 I Heard the Old Men Say	Timmins
1965 Almost Forgotten, Never Told	Timmins
1966 Thunder on the Blaauwberg	Timmins
1967 On Wings of Fire	Timmins
1968 Full Many a Glorious Morning	Timmins
1969 Harbours of Memory	Timmins
1970 A Giant in Hiding	Timmins
1971 A Taste of South-Easter	Timmins
1972 When the Journey's Over	Timmins

Technical:

1947 Authors' Post-War Guide	Allen & Unwin
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Translated into Afrikaans:

1948 Min Mense is Vry

Malherbe

1964 Karoo

Malherbe

Books originally published in South Africa, and published later in England under different titles:

1954 White Man's Grave

Stanley Paul

1955 Panther Head

Stanley Paul

1956 The Drums of Time

Stanley Paul

1961 Old Africa's Last Secrets

Stanley Paul

1962 Islands Time Forgot

Putnam

1967 Like Diamond Blazing

Stanley Paul

Translated into Magyar:

1964 Ahol Megallt Az Ido

T/K Budapest

(Islands Time Forgot)

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South African Air Force  
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